

Redemption

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Redemption

This fanfic is in no way, shape or form, related to any of my previous works. Please be warned that this is a much darker story with very adult themes.

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Feedback to sirengold@yahoo.com please.

All standard disclaimers apply.

Redemption sirenegold

The young barely teenaged boy stepped out of the shower. His body was slender and hairless. Only his height held any promise of the man he should become. He grabbed his towel, wiped the steam from the mirror over the sink and dispassionately surveyed his naked form. Suddenly he whirled, grabbed the shampoo bottle, and hurled it at the mirror.

Glass exploded outwards, covering his face and body with a thousand tiny nicks. Blood slowly trickled down, mixing with the moisture still on his body from his shower. He fell to his knees sobbing, heedless of the tiny shards of glass covering the floor. "No more! No more! No more!" he chanted as he beat his fists impotently against the floor.

Clark Kent leaned back in his chair and sighed contentedly as he watched his wife work. He smiled to himself when she unconsciously caressed her stomach. Under her clothes, there was a tiny, perfect bulge, too small to be noticed by an ordinary observer. Lois was nearing the end of her third month of pregnancy. Clark had almost persuaded her that it was time to share the news with their friends but she wanted to wait until she was completely done her first trimester. Although Dr. Klein had told them that everything was progressing normally, they both couldn't help but be worried about this pregnancy that was so long hoped for.

Clark's head snapped upright. He jumped to his feet before he fully realised the gravity of what he was hearing. And what he was hearing sounded serious indeed. Screams. Lots of them. Coming from kids at the nearby high school. He caught his wife's eye as she reached for her ringing phone. Making a quick, unobtrusive hand gesture to her, he darted from the room, dashed up the stairs, emerged on the roof and, almost simultaneously, spun into his suit and launched himself into the air.

If Clark had been a minute later leaving, he would have seen Lois turning white as a sheet as she listened to the voice from her past on the other end of the telephone line.

As Clark neared the high school, he could see a steady stream of teenagers, mixed with the odd adult, pouring out of the school. The police hadn't arrived yet. He caught sight of an older black woman by the main doors. He recognised her from previous goodwill visits as the Principal, Mrs. Phillips. She seemed to be directing the kids as they emerged. He landed lightly in front of her.

"Superman, thank God you're here!" Her face was pasty and sweaty. He could hear her heart beating raggedly as she struggled to calm down.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Just a minute, Superman." She snagged an older man as he came through the doors. "Mark, take over here, please. I want to talk to Superman."

She stumbled as she started to move away from the doors. Clark offered her his arm, which she took with a weak smile.

"I think you need to sit down. Look. We can sit down right over there." He led her to the nearby bench and watched as she sat down shakily.

"What's going on?" he repeated.

"A student with a gun. He just marched in and told everyone in the hall to get out."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No. But Superman, I don't understand. Corey's a good kid. He could never hurt anyone. I know this kid."

The exodus of children from the school had slowed to a trickle. A young girl stumbled out and caught sight of the two of them talking. She ran towards them waving her arms frantically. "Mrs. Phillips, Superman, I have to talk to you."

Sitting in his office, out of the corner of his eye, Perry caught sight of Clark darting out of the newsroom. "Where in Sam Hill is he going now?" he muttered to himself. He pushed himself to his feet and emerged from his office in time to see Lois turn white as a ghost. She was clutching her phone so tightly he could see her knuckles jutting out from her skin. As he made his way over to her, she turned pale green and started to gasp for air. He knew that look. He started to run and got there just in time. She slammed her phone down, turned to get up and immediately retched into the garbage can he held under her chin. She was thoroughly sick. Finally, her paroxysms slowed to a stop. She looked up at him shakily. "Perry, I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder. "Do you feel better now?"

"Not really. But I think I'll live." She glanced around the newsroom, looking to see if anyone else had witnessed her agitated state. Fortunately, no one seemed to have noticed. Or, if they had, they were making a point of looking away.

"What happened, Lois?" Perry asked in concern. "You got some news, I can tell. That's not just the stomach flu."

"I can't talk about it, Perry. I ... I'm sorry. I just, I just can't talk about it." Lois got to her feet and started hesitantly moving towards the elevator. "I have to go. Tell Clark I went home."

"That's okay, honey. You're obviously not feeling well. Do you want me to drive you?"

"No, thanks. I'll be fine." She pushed the elevator's call button.

Perry eyed her dubiously. She still looked very pale and was obviously very shaky. But he couldn't force her to accept help.

As the elevator doors closed behind her, Jimmy ran into the newsroom. "Perry, there's a hostage situation at JFK High."

"What are you waiting for? Get your camera and get going."

Jimmy turned tail and headed for the stairs. Perry muttered to himself, "Judas Priest, I have two award winning journalists on

staff. One is sick and the other one's gone ... again."

"It's Corey, Mrs. Phillips! He ran into the science lab and told all the kids to leave. He's there alone with Mr. Collins." The young girl gasped for air as she imparted her information to the Super-hero and the older woman.

Over her shoulder, Clark could see Inspector Henderson approaching. He ignored the police officer to focus on the young teenager.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Julie. I'm a good friend of Corey's. I don't know what's going on, or why he would do this." Tears spilled from her eyes as she spoke.

Clark took her hand and sat down with her on the bench beside Mrs. Phillips. "Julie, are you sure you don't know anything about this?"

"I know he didn't like Mr. Collins. He tried to quit science, but Mr. Collins and Mrs. Phillips wouldn't let him." Her eyes darted from his face to Mrs. Phillips.

Mrs. Phillips explained, "It's true, Superman. Corey did want to quit but I don't just let kids quit and have a gap in their curriculum. They have to replace one course with another. It was too late in the semester for Corey to pick up another class so he was informed that he had to stay in his science class."

Clark frowned as he thought this over. "Okay, Julie, Mrs. Phillips. Thanks for your help. I have to talk to the police now and give them this information."

Julie gasped and started to cry. She clutched at the Principal who wrapped her arms around the young girl. "Please don't let the police hurt him, Superman. He's my friend."

Mrs. Phillips nodded and agreed, "He is a good kid, Superman. I just don't understand this at all."

The Super-hero nodded at them in acknowledgement of their words, and got up from the bench. He walked rapidly over the grass towards Inspector Henderson.

Lois stumbled out of the elevator. She looked blindly around the lobby of the Daily Planet building.

She set off out the doors of the Planet building, focused on her self-imposed task.

Clark quickly filled Inspector Henderson in on the scant information that he had gleaned from his conversation with Julie and with Mrs.

Phillips.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Superman. This sounds like a personal vendetta against the teacher - what was his name - Keith Collins?"

"I agree. I think it would be a good idea if I took a quick scan to see what's going on in there. Do you want me to go in?"

"Head in if the situation warrants it. Otherwise, I would prefer you to wait for our negotiator to arrive."

Clark stepped back from the police officer. He flexed his knees to launch himself in the air when he was interrupted.

"Superman, Superman! I forgot to tell you something." Julie waved her arms trying to regain his attention.

"What is it, Julie?"

"Corey's a huge fan of yours. He's kept every newspaper article ever printed about you. He showed me. He has a big scrapbook full of stuff about you. I think he would listen to you more than he would someone from the police."

Clark looked at Inspector Henderson.

"I guess this changes things, Superman. You're hereby approved to begin negotiations."

"Thanks, sir. I'll do my best." Clark turned, zoomed up the steps and entered through the main door of the school.

Lois drove over-cautiously to STAR Labs. Normally an intuitive driver, she forced herself to focus completely on the road. When she looked back on this drive later, she had no idea how she had managed to get to STAR Labs without having an accident.

Clark scanned the science room. Inside he could see a young blond boy training a gun on a cowering adult. Corey and Mr. Collins, he presumed. He paused for a moment, preparing himself mentally, before he would swoop in and disarm the child. Scanning the room again to double-check the positioning of the two people, he noticed something he had missed the first time. Sighing in relief, he smiled grimly. That changed everything. He tapped on the door and waited patiently.

"Who is it?" the young voice quavered.

"It's Superman."

"Come in."

He opened the door, entered the room and calmly surveyed the scene in front of him. A male teacher, Mr. Collins, sat at his desk. He wasn't a very attractive sight. His eyes darted wildly to and fro, and his

mouth worked constantly as he swallowed nervously. He was a big man, muscle gone to fat, about fifty years old, and balding. Like so many men scared of losing their youth, he had carefully plastered his few remaining hairs over the top of his bald patch. His face was pale. His eyes locked on Clark, and he looked pleadingly at the Super-hero.

The young boy holding the gun to the side of the teacher's head was a sorry sight. He had tiny cuts and nicks all over his face and his arms. Clark presumed they continued under the child's clothing. The boy had obviously made a slight attempt to clean his cuts up but he still had dried blood streaked all over. He looked like he was wearing a mask. His eyes were those of a frightened deer trapped in headlights, waiting for the truck to hit. His hands were shaking but he managed not to let the gun shake too much.

"Don't come any closer, Superman," he warned. His voice wavered and broke, suddenly jumping from a shaky treble to a deeper timbre and back again. Clark had no desire to laugh at the incongruity however. This child looked like he was about to snap, and Clark did not want to be the one to make that happen.

"It's all right. Relax. I'm not going to come any closer." The Super-hero sat down, floating in mid-air, facing the two of them. "Mr. Collins, are you all right, sir?"

"Ye-e-s," was the shaky response.

"Okay, Corey, can you tell me why you're doing this?"

"You should be asking him, not me. Go ahead, Superman, why don't you ask him?"

"Okay. Mr. Collins, sir, do you have any idea why Corey's holding you hostage?" Clark asked calmly.

The teacher's eyes flicked back and forth between the angry student and the implacable Super-hero. He gave a quick shake of the head.

"He's lying, you know, Superman. He knows exactly why I'm doing this." Corey spoke calmly. Clark could tell that the child was maintaining his control only with a great deal of difficulty. "Come on, Mr. Collins. Tell Superman why we're spending this quality time together. I'm sure he'd be fascinated. Don't you think so, Mr. Collins?" the boy taunted.

Sweat trickled down the teacher's brow but he remained silent.

"You mean, you don't want to tell him that you love me, that you want to spend time with me, that I'm everything to you?" The child spat his words out defiantly.

"Is that true, sir?" Clark asked sternly.

"Don't call him 'sir'! He doesn't deserve your respect! He's a pervert and he has to be stopped!"

The Super-hero sat up straight. "Corey, did this man molest you?"

"Ha," the child snorted. "Define 'molest'. If you mean he told me to stay after class every day 'just to talk', if you mean he rubbed his body onto mine every chance he got, if you mean he never let me have a minute's peace... If you mean all that, then yes, he molested me."

"Did anything more happen?" Clark's expression turned even grimmer as he glared at the heavily perspiring teacher.

"No, but I could tell it would have. I'm not stupid. He was getting worse all the time, trying to touch me more and more. I guess I just snapped." Corey waved the gun around illustrating his point. "I finally had enough. He wouldn't listen to me say 'no' so..." He shoved the gun back under the teacher's chin. "Are you listening now, Mr. Collins?"

The teacher's head jerked in a quick nod.

"Good!" Corey spat out sarcastically.

"Didn't you report it?"

"Yeah, that was a crock. I told Mr. Rumson. He didn't do anything."

"Who's Mr. Rumson?"

"The Vice-Principal."

"He should have told the police."

"He did. A guy named um, MacDonagh came to see me. He didn't do anything either. And I talked to a guy on the school board, Mr. Albertson. He didn't believe me either."

This didn't sound kosher to Clark. He knew that normally this kind of complaint was taken very seriously and that the police normally bent over backwards to investigate this kind of complaint. Something else jumped out at him about all this too. Why didn't Corey talk to his parents about this?

Inspector Henderson wasn't just waiting patiently for Superman to do his job for him; he was busy deploying officers to deal with the half-hysterical students. He also asked his precinct's desk sergeant if she could track down Corey Vandenburg's mother. In the midst of that chaos, he attempted to interview the Principal, Mrs. Phillips, and the Vice-Principal, Mr. Rumson.

"Did either of you have any occasion to speak with this kid, uh, Corey..." He looked at his notes quickly. "...Vandenburg?" Hmmm, Vandenburg, Vandenburg, the name rang a bell, but he wasn't sure why. It was a common enough name.

Mrs. Phillips shook her head. "Other than telling him that he couldn't drop science, which I've already explained to you, I didn't really talk to him that much other than to say 'hi' in the halls."

"I only ever spoke to him about his science class too," Mr. Rumson replied as his eyes darted back to the school building.

Inspector Henderson didn't know why but he was really picking up on some weird vibrations from this character. He didn't exactly suspect him of anything but...

A patrol car pulled up to the police barrier, and an obviously distraught woman clambered out, and looked around frantically, searching the crowd. Mrs. Phillips waved her arms to get the woman's attention. "It's Mrs. Vandenburg," she said under her breath. "Corey's mother."

Wow! That was fast. Inspector Henderson dispatched one of the uniformed cops, Officer MacDonagh to go and escort the woman through the barriers to him. As the pretty, strawberry-blond woman approached, Inspector Henderson realised why Corey's last name was familiar.

"What about your parents, Corey? You should have told them."

Corey's composed veneer cracked. "My dad's dead. He was killed last year. My mom's been kind of a mess ever since. I couldn't tell her. She's worried enough about everything. How could I tell her?" Corey got more and more agitated as he spoke. "Oh, God!" he continued. "This is going to kill her. What have I done?"

As Clark watched, the young boy pushed himself violently away from the science teacher, and slumped to the floor sobbing. Mr. Collins bolted for the door. Clark stopped him with a hand on the arm. "Don't go too far, Mr. Collins. Don't make me come looking for you," he said as he fixed the teacher with a steely glare.

The man turned even paler but nodded in resignation.

Clark let him leave, and then moved over beside Corey. The boy knelt on the floor, rocking back and forth, keening out his anguish. Clark knelt down beside him, gently pulled the boy into his arms, and rocked him like a baby.

"Shh, Corey, it's going to be all right."

"How can you say that? I pulled a gun on a teacher."

"A gun with no bullets."

"How...?" Corey stuttered.

Clark smiled bleakly, half-amused in spite of himself. "I scanned the room before I knocked. You know, you're lucky I came through that door and not the police. They wouldn't have been able to tell the gun was empty, and things would have been a whole lot more serious. No, I looked and when I saw the gun was empty, I realised there was more going on here, and that I better listen to you."

"I...I shouldn't have done this. This is going to kill my mother. I

shouldn't have done this but I couldn't handle it any more. I just wanted it to stop. And no one believed me. Superman, I just wanted it to stop," Corey sputtered and half-sobbed.

"That's the part that really bothers me, Corey. Someone should have believed you. I have two friends, reporters..."

"Lois Lane and Clark Kent." Corey interrupted getting calmer as their conversation proceeded.

Clark was shocked. In his experience, most teenagers didn't read the paper, and avoided hard news like the plague.

"They write about you all the time, so I read their stuff," Corey explained.

"Oh," Clark paused, embarrassed at the blatant hero worship, "anyway, I'd like to tell them what happened and have them look into why you weren't believed if that's okay with you."

"Yeah, I guess." Corey paused, thinking hard. "What happens next?"

"Next, we're going to walk out of here calmly. I'm going to hold onto the gun, and you and I are going to talk to Inspector Henderson. He's a good guy. He'll treat you fairly. I'm sorry to tell you that he will have to arrest you; he's not going to have a choice in the matter." Clark's heart went out to this poor misguided teenager. How horrible it must have been to have no one believe him. He had tried to report the molestation to the police, and the school. The big question, the question that caused all the bells and whistles to go off in his reporter's brain was why didn't anyone believe Corey.

"How much trouble am I in, Superman?"

"That's going to be up to the judge. There are extenuating circumstances, but you did bring a gun into the school. I know it wasn't loaded, but still ... We'll have to wait and see. I'll talk to the judge."

"You will? Thank you." Corey roughly swiped his sleeve across his eyes, and snuffled a couple of times.

"I think Clark and Lois will be a big help to you too. They can investigate Mr. Collins, and also try to find out why no one took you seriously."

Corey nodded, and then pushed himself to his feet. "I guess this is it, right?"

"Yes, are you ready?"

Corey nodded and the two of them headed to the door.

Dr. Klein became more and more agitated as he listened to Lois. Normally, when she was upset she delivered information in a rapid-fire manner, but today, she talked in fits and starts, with

lots of awkward pauses. She finished and, eyes downcast, waited for his response.

He thought for a long moment. He wasn't comfortable with clinical work, thinking that he could be too blunt for patients. He didn't want to be blunt now, as he was very much aware of Lois's fragile emotional state. Picking and choosing his words with care, he began.

"Lois, I won't deny that it's a possibility. I never thought to check for that when I did the blood tests. I mean, I never knew that I had a reason to. I think, before we start speculating here, and getting all worked up, I should take more blood. Luckily I can do the test here. We don't want to send your blood out to an independent lab. They might pick up on some uh, anomalies caused by the baby and its unique... heritage. It'll take about a week to process. Then we'll know. Okay?"

She nodded sombrely as she rolled up her sleeve.

"Mrs. Vandenburg, I'm Inspector Henderson." The lanky police officer moved quickly to the side of the attractive, yet very distraught woman.

"Where's Corey? Your officer told me that there was a kid in the school with a gun. Is Corey a hostage?"

Inspector Henderson took both of her hands in his and spoke calmly. "Listen to me. Corey brought a gun to school today." She gasped in disbelief as he continued. "He hasn't fired it. He let all the other kids leave, and he's holding a teacher."

"Why? Why would he do something like this?"

"We don't know. But I don't want you to worry. Superman's here and he's gone in to talk to your son and to check on Mr. Collins. You know Superman's reputation. He doesn't want anyone to get hurt, and from what your son's friend told us, Superman's a hero to Corey. He'll defuse the situation. You'll see." As the police officer continued to talk in soothing platitudes, Mrs. Vandenburg cried quietly. The crowd noises suddenly got louder, alerting them that something had changed.

Inspector Henderson looked up in time to see an adult stumble out the front door of the school. He was pasty-faced and sweating, and seemed to have trouble putting one foot in front of the other. Officer MacDonagh hurried to his side. The two men exchanged a couple of sharp words leaving Officer MacDonagh looking very unsettled. Inspector Henderson's eyes narrowed in thought as he watched MacDonagh head over to Rumson, and speak to him. Now Rumson looked upset. Inspector Henderson could tell something was up! He was about to approach his officer to ask what was happening, when even louder noises arose from the crowd. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Superman and a young boy emerge from the school. The Super-hero had his arm draped lightly around the young boy's shoulders. Before he could even start to move towards the two of them, Mrs. Vandenburg had run past him to her son's side.

Clark flew quickly back to the general vicinity of the Planet. He was going to enjoy filing this story. Inspector Henderson had been more than sympathetic to Corey. Henderson had taken Clark aside and filled him in privately as to the details of Corey's father's death. Much as Clark was distressed that the boy had lost his father, this story would definitely make any judge more sympathetic. Inspector Henderson had already started asking hard questions about Officer MacDonagh's involvement in the whole situation, and he was also talking of interviewing the board member, Mr. Albertson. Mr. Rumson had been asked to make a 'voluntary' statement about his actions too. From the look on Mrs. Phillips' face, there would be more hard questions being asked after Rumson was done talking to the police. Good. They should have taken Corey's complaints seriously.

Clark already had his suspicions as to what exactly had been going on with Collins, Rumson, MacDonagh, and Albertson. A pedophile ring. A conspiracy. Inspector Henderson suspected it too, but now the fun for the detective and the reporter would start - looking for proof.

Clark could hardly wait to get back and tell Lois and Perry about this story. It had Kerth award written all over it.

Thank heaven Corey had not been seriously abused. What he had suffered had been more than enough though. At least that was over for him.

Clark landed in the convenient alley behind the Planet. He scanned the area, saw no one and spun quickly back into his street clothes. Bounding through the door of the Planet building, he felt too impatient to wait for the elevator, instead taking the stairs at a gallop.

Lois sat on the window-seat in the living room, looking at the street outside the window. How could things have changed so quickly? They had been so happy this morning. How would she tell Clark? She dreaded his return; she didn't want to have to see the look in his eyes when she told him.

Perry was on the phone when Clark approached his office. He could tell from the look on his reporter's face that he had a good story. He waved Clark in, and motioned to a chair while he finished his phone call.

Perry hung up, and focused all his attention on Clark. Clark was so excited about this that all his words were tumbling out, one on top of the other. Clark was normally pretty enthusiastic about his work, but this was exceptional even for him. Perry could tell from the sounds of it that this was going to be a big story though.

Clark's furious torrent of words slowed to a trickle and then to a full stop.

He paused to catch his breath and then asked the inevitable question,

the question that Perry was surprised he hadn't asked right away.

"Where's Lois?"

"She, uh, she wasn't feeling too well, Clark. Not sure if she had the stomach flu or not. She was pretty nauseous but I'm not sure, I think she was upset about something too."

Clark smiled to himself. Lois had been feeling pretty ill at times ever since she got pregnant. This was the first time that she hadn't managed to hide it at work. Maybe he should go home and check on her. Clark thought about transcribing his notes first but, at second thought, decided to head home right away.

Inspector Henderson was just leaving his precinct after a very long and tiring day, when he heard a sonic boom. He saw a streak flash straight up, disappearing from sight in literally a blink of the eye.

Henderson put the minor mystery of what Superman was up to, out of his mind as he reflected on the events of the day. The whole incident could have ended so differently. Not for the first time, Henderson thanked his lucky stars that Superman had ended up in Metropolis.

Corey Vandenburg was one good kid who had made one huge mistake. Henderson wasn't surprised that he actually liked the kid. Any child of Klaas Vandenburg's was bound to be a good kid. Henderson thought back to the circumstances surrounding Klaas's death.

After it was all over, there had been no doubt in anyone's mind that the man was a bona-fide hero. Even though he was a firefighter, no one would have blamed him if he hadn't gone into the burning building. He had been off duty, and he hadn't had any of his bunker gear with him. For Vandenburg to dash unprotected into that building had been a real act of courage. He had got the kids out though, literally tossing a baby out of the flames and into the arms of a waiting police officer. And not just any police officer. It had been Henderson who had winced as he watched the beam crash down, pinning Vandenburg in the flames, condemning the man to a cruel and painful death. He hadn't been able to reach Vandenburg to save him, and he still blamed himself for it.

Vandenburg wasn't directly part of today's situation, but the whole thing must have been pretty hard on Corey and on his mom. Henderson's expression softened as he thought of Mrs. Vandenburg. She had been so concerned for her son, and so horrified at what Collins had been doing to him. Henderson couldn't bring himself to condemn the woman for not noticing her son's problem. She was obviously still devastated by her husband's death. Poor woman. Now she had this on her plate as well. He resolved that he would speak to the judge in Corey's favour. Maybe present him with the facts about the boy's father's death - privately of course. Hopefully, with his help, and with Superman's help, the kid would just get a smack on the knuckles and nothing worse.

Hmmm. Perhaps he should start going around and visiting the

Vandenburgs from time to time. It would do the boy good to have a father figure to confide in. Henderson wondered if Mrs. Vandenburg would be glad of his help or not. Oh well, he could only ask.

Once again, Henderson reflected that things might have unfolded very, very differently without Superman's help. The kid could very well have been killed if the situation had escalated. The big guy must feel pretty good about himself right now, knowing that he had quite possibly saved that child from serious harm.

Clark had never felt so terrible in his whole life. He flew faster and faster. In only a split-second, he reached the outer edge of the atmosphere and screeched to a stop. He floated, not part of the stars and not part of the world below, but for the first time, this position in the sky brought him no comfort. This wasn't what he needed right now. He needed... He needed... He didn't know what.

It had taken every ounce of his love for Lois to keep him in their home until she had fallen asleep. Every molecule in his body had been screaming at him to fly away, as fast and as far as he could. But he had stayed, fighting to get in control of his adrenaline rush, knowing it wasn't Lois that he wanted to flee from, and she had cried herself to sleep in his arms. All he had been able to offer were lame and meaningless words, and no real comfort.

He had thought that he had felt pain before - anguish at the separation from Lois when he left with the New Kryptonians, desolation when he thought Bad-Brain Johnson had killed her, sorrow when he feared that she would choose Scardino over him, and panic when Lex Luthor had kidnapped her and replaced her with a clone. But he had never felt anything even remotely similar to the fierce, primal emotions that coursed through him now.

He was too agitated to keep still for long, and without even planning it, he found himself in the arctic, screaming inarticulately as he smashed at a glacier, again and again and again, until it was a mass of splintered ice. This, this destruction, this was what he needed right now.

It was the force of his emotions that brought him to his knees in the ice and snow, moaning in anguish as he relived that terrible moment when Lois had told him.

He had gone home, happy, content, and secure in his love for her and her love for him. He had been oh, so complacent and proud of the actions that had potentially saved a child from a violent confrontation with the police. He had been so smug! Everything had turned to ashes in only a few tense moments, with only a few terse words.

When he had got home, he had announced himself, as always, and gone looking for Lois, as always, expecting her to cheerfully greet him, as always, but that hadn't been what had happened. He had found Lois sitting in the living room on the window seat. One look at her still, frozen face, and he had known that something earth shattering had happened. Throwing himself on his knees in front of her, he had taken her hand in his, only to feel her flinch at his touch.

"What happened?" he had asked. He hadn't expected the halting recitation that had followed.

"I had a phone call today, just after you left," she had said slowly. "It was from Claude. Do you remember me telling you about him?" At his silent nod, she had sighed and continued, "He phoned to tell me, to tell me... Oh, Clark! He phoned to tell me he has AIDS!" she had finished her sentence in a rush. "He doesn't know when he got it, but he thinks it was before he was with me, because when he phoned the girlfriend that he had before me, she was already sick."

"But that means..." Clark had heard himself say in a panic as he had dropped her hands, and jumped to his feet.

"I went to see Dr. Klein right away," she had told him. "And he took some blood to test. It's going to take about a week to get the results... Oh God, Clark! I don't want our baby to die!"

"But we don't know that you have it."

"No, but Dr. Klein looked worried." And she had looked at him with those big, dark eyes brimming over with tears. He had never felt so helpless as he wrapped his arms around his wife to hold her close. He had envied her the salt of her tears, as she cried piteously in his arms. He had never been able to experience that release. Even in the grip of the strongest emotion, tears refused to come to him.

Clark had rocked Lois, crooning tunelessly to her, until her ragged breathing smoothed out, and slowed as she fell into a restless sleep. He had waited, stroking her back lightly until she was more deeply asleep before he had gently disengaged her clutching arms.

And now he found himself here, sprawled in the snow, hugging the cold to him, wishing it could freeze his heart, and feeling in need of someone to soothe him, to rock him, and to comfort him. For one brief moment, he thought of his parents, but he couldn't bring himself to tell them about this. They were so happy about the baby. He couldn't bear to watch the light of anticipation die in their eyes. Oh God! He wished he could cry!

Finally, his initial rush of adrenaline spent, he pushed himself slowly to his feet. He should go home. Lois might wake up and she would need him. But for the first time in the course of their marriage, he didn't know what to say to her. He didn't know what to do. The thought that she might... No. He buried it deep. No, it couldn't be true. It just wasn't possible.

Lois didn't look so good, Perry thought. Neither did Clark. He knew that it hadn't been just a stomach flu that had sent Lois running out of the newsroom the other week. And whatever the problem was, it was affecting Clark too. He watched them interact with each other. They were stiff and formal with each other, but he didn't think angry. As he watched, Lois got up, walked to Clark, and handed him a file. They exchanged a couple of short words, and then Lois went back to her desk. No, definitely not angry, but there was something going on. They hadn't touched each other spontaneously in days. Perry normally liked watching them, seeing that easy camaraderie, and those light affectionate caresses. Not even today's news that they were nominated

for another Kerth Award had cheered them up. He continued to watch, worried about his two protégés.

Lois surreptitiously watched Clark as he worked. He had wanted her to take a few days off, but she had refused. It would have driven her crazy to stay home alone, waiting for the test results, with nothing else to think about then the terrible news she had received. It wasn't much better here, though. Clark was so adamant that everything was going to be all right that it was driving her nuts. He absolutely refused to discuss this terrible possibility with her, and seeing that it was just about the only non-work related thing on her mind, it didn't give them a lot of other topics of conversation.

He was being so, so solid and dependable that she just wanted to hit him. Her mind was in a whirl, her emotions on a roller coaster, and her husband refused to give credence to her fears. She had given up talking to him about it. She was getting pretty tired of hearing "There's no way you could have this" whenever she brought the subject up. But she really needed to talk this out.

He didn't understand how dirty she felt. Even the possibility that she might have been exposed to AIDS was enough to flood her with revulsion for herself. How could she have been so stupid? This was all her fault, and she and her baby were going to pay for her mistake. Oh, how she wanted, how she needed to talk about this, but Clark just refused. It was the first time that she ever felt that he was patronizing her. She felt as though the pressure building up inside of her was going to shatter her into tiny pieces and she couldn't turn to her husband for his help. She didn't know where else she could turn.

Out of the corner of his eye Clark watched Lois as she worked. He flinched, and hastily looked away as he saw that she was unconsciously caressing her stomach. He had wanted her to take a few days off, but she had refused. She said she didn't want to sit home alone brooding but that's all she seemed to do, even here in the office. Whenever he looked at her, she flinched under the weight of his gaze. And the raw emotions in her eyes made him flinch in return. He had never felt so apart from her, so isolated. Not ever. She was pushing him away, putting roadblocks between them. He just couldn't seem to make himself break through the barrier that was separating him from her. It didn't seem to matter how often he reassured her that there was no way she could have this illness, he didn't seem to be able to get through to her.

Her phone rang and they both jumped. She grimaced and picked up the handset. As he watched, Lois listened for only a second, turned white, and shouted, "Leave me alone!" into the phone before slamming it down.

Clark moved to her, stood behind her, and asked, "Who was it?"

"It was him, Claude."

A wave of hot rage flooded through Clark. He had to consciously unclench his fists and take a couple of deep breaths. When he was sure that he had control of his voice, he calmly asked, "What did he want?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. I don't want to talk to him ever again."

Clark only nodded silently in agreement, and moved back to his desk. He didn't want his wife to associate with that, that sick degenerate either. A wave of raw primal anger washed through him, his whole body tensing in reaction to it. It scared him how much he wanted to kill that man.

Inspector Henderson waited impatiently outside the courthouse. It was almost time for Corey to appear in front of a judge and Superman had promised that he would be there. He figured that between the two of them, they would have a huge influence on the judge, and the kid would get the break he deserved.

He checked his watch again - 5 more minutes until it was time for the court appearance. Where was he? Henderson sighed. He had no choice. He reached into his pocket for a quarter and went to find a pay phone.

"Clark Kent."

"Kent? Henderson. Any chance you could contact the big guy for me? I'm at the courthouse, and he promised to be here for that kid he helped out the other day."

Clark was shocked. He had totally forgotten. "I'll get him there; don't worry."

He hung up the phone, and walked over to Lois. "Lois," he said softly, "I have to go to the courthouse and help that boy I told you about. I'll be back in a little while. Are you going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine, Clark. You go."

He brushed his lips lightly across her cheek, paused for a moment as if about to say something, but then silently left.

Lois watched him go. Two tears rolled slowly down her face.

After the hearing with the judge was over, Inspector Henderson reflected that he had never seen Metropolis's resident Super-hero looking so grim. He didn't know what was wrong, didn't even know how to ask the man what was wrong, but something was obviously up. Even so, Superman had made some powerful comments about what had transpired in the science room and about the unexpected twist that had occurred in the hostage situation. The judge had been properly horrified by the revelation that Corey had been molested by his teacher. She had also been very sympathetic to the kid for having lost his father in such a devastating way. Her Honour had not dismissed the charges; she couldn't in light of all the evidence against Corey, but, she had had the choice of treating him as an

adult or a juvenile, and she had chosen juvenile. Therefore, these charges wouldn't go into his permanent record. Also, Corey would not have to spend any time behind bars, but would have to receive counselling. It had helped too, that both Inspector Henderson and Superman had volunteered to check in with the boy and his mother from time to time. The judge had been impressed that the two of them felt he merited their personal attention.

The detective and the Super-hero spoke briefly after the hearing was over. Henderson filled Superman in as to what was going on with his investigation of the pedophile ring. It looked like it consisted of only the four men, thank heavens. Henderson had heard of other rings that were a lot larger. All four men were under arrest.

Superman asked, as was his wont, if he could pass on the information to Clark Kent and Lois Lane, and Henderson acquiesced as he almost always did. He was always grateful that Superman asked permission first, but it really wouldn't matter if Henderson declined. The two reporters were incredibly good at ferreting out the truth, but at least, were pretty ethical in their use of the information that they garnered. Henderson respected them both greatly. He didn't always trust them; they were reporters after all, but he did respect them.

The two men idly spoke for a few more minutes about the case, and then Superman took off.

Henderson couldn't help but think about Superman's reactions. They had been off, different from his norm. He had winced when Henderson had commented that life was sometimes not fair. He had been speaking about Corey, and about how he had suffered the loss of his father, and been maltreated by his teacher, but he got the feeling that the Super-hero was personally relating to his words.

After Superman flew off, Henderson was left feeling as if he should have volunteered to help. To help with what, he didn't know. But Superman had looked very troubled, and very grim. The detective was reminded anew as to just how much he didn't know about Metropolis's resident Super-hero.

Clark slowly flew back to the Daily Planet. He didn't want to go back to work, but he couldn't leave Lois there by herself. If only they could bring themselves to talk about all this, but as of yet, they couldn't. It was too raw for both of them. He had all these feelings swirling around inside him and yet, he couldn't even figure out what he was feeling.

He still hadn't told his mother and father about this most recent development. He couldn't bring himself to do it. He had no desire to inflict what he and Lois were currently going through on anyone else.

He landed on the roof, and surveyed the city, looking for trouble - hoping for trouble. Nothing. He breathed deeply, searching for his customary control. Berating himself for letting his emotions get the better of him, he reminded himself that Lois was fine. There was no way that she could ever... No, he couldn't let himself think about that.

He sighed heavily, and headed for the stairs. He had only descended half a flight of steps when he heard a thin thread of sound. Lois. Crying. He half-ran, and half-flew the rest of the way, and barrelled through the door into the newsroom. She wasn't at her desk. It didn't take him more than a split-second to locate her in Perry's office. The editor was patting her awkwardly on the shoulder as he plied her with tissues.

Clark didn't bother with knocking; he didn't have time for the social niceties. "What happened?" he asked, as he barged into the room, his eyes ablaze and his fists clenched.

Lois looked up with a gasp. "It was him again. Claude. He came into the newsroom, and tried to talk to me. I...I couldn't even face him. I heard his voice, and I hid in the supply room. Thankfully Perry threw him out." She gave the editor a wan smile of gratitude.

Her boss smiled bleakly back at her. "He gave me no choice, Lois. I couldn't have him acting up like that in here."

Clark could feel his fists curling up even tighter, his fingernails digging into the palms of his hands. "Acting up like what?"

"Harassing your wife. She told him not to bother her, and he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Kept insisting that she had to listen to him. Well, I wasn't going to have one of my top reporters talked to like that. It wasn't like I owed him anything. The man hasn't worked for the Daily Planet in quite a few years."

"I appreciate it, Perry. Hopefully, he won't be bothering Lois anymore, but if he does, I hope he does it when I'm here," Clark replied grimly. He eyed Lois in concern. She looked pretty pale, and she was shaking. "Are you okay?"

"I will be."

Lois thanked Perry, got to her feet, and headed back to her desk. Clark followed a moment later, after awkwardly expressing his own thanks to his boss.

It was hard for them to settle back to work. Lois kept jumping every time the elevator dinged, signalling its stops. And after she had knocked over three glasses of water in a row when her phone rang, she finally gave up on drinking it.

Her phone rang yet again. This time when she jumped, she sent her pen flipping out of her fingers towards her husband. He caught it without any show of his usual panache, got up from his desk, and humourlessly handed it back to her as she answered her ringing phone.

"Lois Lane." She caught at her husband's sleeve as he started to move back towards his desk. "Yes, Dr. Klein. Okay, we'll be right there."

Lois hung up her phone and got to her feet. "He wants to see us."

Their trip in the elevator was made in silence, both of them wrapped

up in their own thoughts.

"Did he say . . .?" Clark asked falteringly as they got into her jeep.

"No."

"How did he sound?"

"I . . . I couldn't tell at all. Non-committal I guess."

Lois was about to start the jeep when she glanced at her husband's stolid profile as he looked straight ahead. Her eyes filled with tears. She couldn't help it. Her sobs broke through and she buried her face in her hands.

Clark turned to her and laid a gentle hand on her arm. "Lois, please, honey. This isn't good for you, or for the baby."

"I can't help it. Oh, Clark, what if he tells me..."

"He's not going to. You know that. There's no way."

"How do you know?" Lois asked him in frustration. "Why am I so different? Why don't you think I can get sick too?"

Clark blew out his breath heavily in exasperation. "Lois, you just can't, okay? Trust me on this."

"Clark, listen to me. I can get sick. I could get cancer or have an ulcer, or have a stroke, or a heart attack, or someday have Alzheimer's or... or I could get AIDS," she finished softly.

"Stop!" Clark ran his hands through his hair. "I...No. I...You can't. You just can't. I won't let you."

"Clark, I have to talk about this or I'll scream." Lois turned to him, grabbed his shoulders and shook him, trying to make him listen, really listen to her. "I could have AIDS. Our baby could have AIDS. You need to take this seriously and stop, just stop being so sure of yourself."

"No. You.... No. Lois, you can't... You just can't..."

Lois was shocked to see her husband start to tremble, and then to shake. His mask of indifference shattered, allowing his anguish to show. "I'm sorry," he gasped. He inhaled a great, deep shuddering breath, and exhaled noisily. He leaned forward and buried his head in his trembling hands. "Lois, you can't. I won't let you. I, I'm so scared, Lois. I don't want to lose you, or the baby. You can't leave me. Please, Lois. Don't ever... You're my whole life. I can't lose you. I won't."

"Oh, Clark." Lois dissolved in fresh tears. "I'm scared too," she sobbed.

As always when his wife needed him, he was able to regain a small amount of control over his shaky emotions. He turned to her, and awkwardly pulled her towards him, frustrated by the steering wheel,

and the gear shift, not able to achieve the full embrace that he wanted. He settled for wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I... You wanted to talk about this, but Lois, I can't. I'm just so scared. I don't ever want to be apart from you."

Lois looked at him intently. "Clark, this is going to happen someday. Either I'll be alone or you will. Chances are we won't die at the same time."

He flinched back for a second at her words. "Lois, I know what you're saying is true, but... Lois, I never thought we would have to confront this now. It's too soon. I kind of figured this would be an issue that we wouldn't get to for a while."

"Well, it's here now, Clark, and I need your support. I need to be able to talk to you and have you listen to me. You have to be there for me now." Her anger lent strength to her words.

"I... You're right, Lois. I'm sorry. I haven't been supportive, have I? But I will be. I don't ever want to let you down, Lois. And I don't ever want you to think that you're in this alone. Whatever Dr. Klein has to say, he'll say it to the two of us. And we'll deal with it together." Clark gently caressed Lois's cheek as he spoke.

She turned her head and tenderly kissed the palm of his hand before looking at him solemnly. "We're not done talking about this, Clark, but I think we better not keep Dr. Klein waiting any longer," she said seriously, before turning the key in the jeep's ignition.

Dr. Klein got to his feet as the two reporters entered the room. If he was aware of the focused attention he was receiving as the two of them tried to assess his mood, he didn't show it.

He shut the door behind them, and perched on the edge of his desk facing them.

Lois sat in front of him, clutching at the arms of her chair, white-knuckled, unable to articulately formulate a question.

Clark glanced at Lois in worry, and then focused all his attention on Dr. Klein. "What did the test show?"

"I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to tell you, but Lois, you have measurable quantities of the HIV antibodies in your blood. I wish I had better news for you, but I don't. I'm so sorry."

"Oh." Lois spoke in a still, small voice. "I was really hoping... I was counting on..."

"Lois has AIDS?" Clark couldn't bring himself to understand what Dr. Klein had just said.

Dr. Klein sighed heavily. "First of all, Lois does not have AIDS. She has no symptoms. She is however, HIV positive. It's not an automatic death sentence like it was a few years ago. There are drugs that slow things down, and in many cases, seem to prevent HIV from developing into AIDS. Also, there is a treatment available, AZT, for your child that would be administered before birth that would decrease the

likelihood of your baby ever developing AIDS."

Lois sighed heavily. She studied her hands as they lay limply in her lap. "I know all this stuff; I've done stories on it. But now that it's personal, now that it's about me, I've forgotten everything I ever knew about it. I feel so hopeless, like there's no chance for me and no chance for my baby. I can't help but feel violated, and dirty, and ashamed. This is my fault. I did it to myself. And I did it to our child." Tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Clark didn't hesitate. He knelt in front of her, took both of her hands in his, and focused on her completely. "Lois, listen to me. You are a good woman, and you're a good wife. I know you're going to be a good mother. This is not your fault. You did nothing wrong. You need to remember this." He paused for a second. He didn't know that she had been blaming herself. But, he thought bitterly, he hadn't bothered to find out, had he? "You didn't know. How could you? I remember what it was like then. AIDS was a homosexual disease or something that drug users got - not people like," his voice broke, "you."

"That's right," Dr. Klein agreed. "Some of my friends, scientists who should have known better, were pretty casual about their social life. So, why would a lay-person even think of taking any precautions?"

Lois nodded, clearly unconvinced of her innocence in this, but not wanting to discuss it further at this point in time.

"Now then," Dr. Klein briskly changed the subject, "Lois, I'd like to take more blood and run more tests. There is one big unknown in all this. We know that Clark is immune to this virus being Kryptonian, but we don't know how your baby will react to the virus or to the AZT. I don't want to get your hopes up, but, if the baby's immune system is more Kryptonian than human..."

Lois and Clark looked up at him, their eyes shining. Dr. Klein groaned inwardly. He had known he shouldn't say anything. He just hoped he hadn't given them false hope.

Lois sat at her desk, working calmly. She felt much better today than she had a few days ago. She and Clark had started to talk things out - they weren't done by a long shot - and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she had his full support once again. She supposed she should have been angry with him for his reaction, but she couldn't bring herself to blame him. She had been scared out of her skin too. She still was. But she was too grateful that she had her husband back listening to her to start trying to lay blame. Besides, he was beating himself up enough for the two of them.

And Dr. Klein thought that maybe their baby would be okay! Lois smiled to herself, then forced those thoughts out of her head. She didn't want to get her hopes up, only to have them dashed if the news were bad.

The elevator dinged. Lois looked up, hoping to see her husband emerge, back from dealing with an emergency. Instead she saw a young boy step out and tentatively look around the newsroom. He approached

Jimmy and asked a question. She couldn't hear the conversation but she figured out who the boy wanted to see when Jimmy pointed in her direction as he spoke.

Lois got up, smoothed the wrinkles out of her skirt and approached the adolescent.

"Hi, I'm Lois Lane. Can I help you?"

He smiled, and awkwardly thrust his right hand at her. "Hi. I'm Corey Vandenburg."

"Oh! You're Corey. Come on into the conference room and we can talk."

The two of them sat down opposite each other. Lois smiled broadly, seeking to put the boy at ease, and asked her first question.

"What can I do for you?"

"Um, my mom wanted me to come here and ask you or Mr. Kent to thank Superman for me. I wanted to come here too. He saved my butt, both at school and in court."

"I can do that."

"Thanks." He lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

"How are you doing, Corey?"

He looked away from her. "Okay, I guess."

"You and your mom are okay?"

No reaction from him. "Yeah."

"Counselling's okay?"

Still nothing. "Yeah."

"How about school?"

Bingo! He flinched and his hands tightened into fists. "It's fine," he mumbled.

"Your other teachers are being understanding?"

He nodded.

"And Mr. Rumson's not there anymore, right?"

"Yeah. He's under arrest."

"What about the other students, and your friends? Everything okay."

Corey's eyes welled up with tears. He roughly brushed them away.

"Damn."

"Hey, Corey, it's okay. You can talk to me. I won't tell anyone."

Lois reached across and laid her hand lightly over one of his.

He fidgeted in his chair, swallowed, and started. "They all act, I don't know, different around me. I don't know how to explain it, but when I walk into a room..."

"...they stop talking," Lois continued.

"Yeah! And they look at me differently."

"And they don't know what to say to you," Lois said.

"Exactly! They act like it's my fault that Mr. Collins hit on me."

"Like you did something to entice him."

Corey and Lois stared at each other intensely. He suddenly grinned at her. "How do you know what I'm feeling?"

"I had something bad happen to me too. It was a long time ago. It wasn't like what happened to you. But I was taken advantage of. I've been thinking about it a lot recently."

"Did you ever feel, I don't know, like it was um, your fault?"

"Yes, and sometimes I still do," Lois replied grimly.

"How do you handle it?"

"You just do. It's either deal with it or give up. I don't give up. I won't give up."

Corey smiled at her. "I never thought of that. I guess I won't either."

"Good!" Lois was pleased. There was something about this kid that she really liked. "Corey, you're welcome to call me any time, or come here and talk to me about this stuff. I'd like to help."

"Thanks!" Corey fidgeted and looked a little uncomfortable for a minute. "Um, there is something I want to ask you if that's okay."

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Um, that cop, Inspector Henderson, is he an okay guy? He keeps hanging around our house, and talking to me and my mom. He's not another pervert, is he?"

Lois couldn't help but giggle. "No, he's not. I think he just wants to help. He's not very good at the touchy-feely emotional stuff, is he?"

Corey grinned. "No, he's not!"

"Well, to be fair, sometimes I'm not either." Her smile faded. "But this is something I can talk to you about, anytime you want."

"Yeah, well, thanks again, Ms. Lane."

"It's Lois, Corey."

"Thanks, Lois."

Corey ended up being a frequent visitor of Lois's over the next week. He and Clark got along well too, but he and Lois just seemed to bond. Despite his relative youth, Lois was beginning to count him as a true friend.

Clark enjoyed his company too. It was almost like having a younger brother.

On the eve of the Kerth Awards, Clark lounged on the bed smirking. A silvery grey beaded dress came flying out of the closet and landed on the bed beside him. "No luck?" he asked with a repressed chuckle.

"I can hear you laughing. You think I can't but I really can. Don't you laugh at me, Clark Kent. This is not funny!" A black evening dress came zinging out and added itself to the heap of discarded clothing.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

She was attacking the closet walls now; this was not a good sign! Clark got off the bed, and gingerly looked into the walk-in closet. "Are you okay?"

Lois sat on the floor surrounded by numerous empty clothes hangers. "Do I look okay to you?" She kicked the wall again in emphasis.

"Um, no. I guess not. Doesn't anything fit?"

"No, and the awards are tomorrow night. What am I going to wear?" she wailed.

"Honey, I know you wanted to wait, we haven't told anyone yet, but, um, you've kind of er, blossomed recently and it looks like we have to go and buy you..."

"A maternity outfit." Lois concluded glumly.

"Is that so bad?" Clark sat down on the closet floor beside her.

"No, not really," she admitted. "But I was hoping, I want..."

"You want to hear the results of Dr. Klein's tests before we tell anyone about the baby," Clark said softly as pulled her close.

"Yeah, I do. I thought he would have had an answer for us by now, but

he just keeps running more tests and taking more blood from me. I'm starting to feel like a pincushion." Lois leaned her head against his shoulder.

He kissed her forehead gently. "It's going to be okay. I just know it."

"Oh, honey, I hope you're right. I just keep feeling, oh, I don't know, I just keep feeling responsible for all of this, like it's all my fault."

"Honey, you can't blame yourself. When you and ..." Clark cleared his throat. "...Claude were together, people had barely even heard of AIDS. You didn't plan this. It's not your fault." This was a conversation the two of them had had repeatedly in one form or another over the last little while.

Lois sighed as she snuggled even closer in her husband's embrace. He echoed her sigh with one of his own. Lois glanced up at him in time to see one of 'those looks' come over his face.

"What is it?" she asked as she sat up straight.

"Sounds like an apartment fire. I better go." Clark jumped to his feet, grasped Lois by the wrist and pulled her up. He gave her a quick kiss, and ran. By the time Lois emerged from the closet, he was gone.

Lois glumly surveyed the pile of discarded clothes on her bed. She supposed she should hang them back up again, she thought reluctantly. As she made her first tentative move towards them with a hanger in her hand, the phone rang.

Saved by the bell!

It was late. Clark was very weary in both body and spirit as he flew back to his home. It had been a busy evening. He had segued from the apartment fire to a major car accident to a mugging to a rape situation. People had died, both at the fire, and in the car accident. This was the kind of night that he dreaded, and this was the kind of night where he needed Lois the most. But she had been so tired recently from the pregnancy, and from worrying, that he felt he just couldn't wake her up to talk. It wouldn't be fair.

When he saw his house lit up like a Christmas tree, with candles glowing in every room, he literally came to a stop in mid-air. What the...? Puzzled, he scanned the house quickly, and smiled, his mood miraculously brightening. Lois was sitting in the living room, and she was wearing what was obviously a new dress - a maternity dress. It made her look very pregnant!

Clark quickly circled the house as per usual, and when he saw that the coast was clear and that there was no one about who might possibly see him, he zipped through the open bedroom window, and spun into his regular clothes. He bounced down the stairs, dashed into the living room, and came to a stop in front of his wife. Lois looked up at him with a smile that illuminated the far corners of the room. She glowed. She hadn't looked this happy since they had found out she

really was pregnant.

A bottle of red wine, a glass of milk, and a wineglass were on the coffee table in front of her.

"Lois, honey, you look beautiful. Very pregnant but very beautiful. What is all this?"

She got up from her chair, poured a glass of wine and handed it to him. It was all done with a very mysterious smile on her face. "We're celebrating! The wine is for you, and the milk for me."

"What are we celebrating?"

"No, first I want to make a toast."

"Okay."

Lois held her glass of milk in front of her. "To Clark Kent. You are my support in bad times, and my joy in good. You're my husband, my partner, and my lover, the father of my child. I love you more and more with every passing day. You're the only man in or out of this world for me, and I look forward to growing old with you."

"Growing old? You mean? Dr. Klein called?"

Lois nodded happily.

"What did he say?"

"Everything's going to be fine, Clark. I didn't really understand all the details, you know how he gets sometimes, but, well, he noticed that my antibody count was down on my second test, and so he did another, and it was less again on my third test, and less again on my fourth test, and well, he thinks that the baby has your immune system, and somehow, my blood is being filtered through the placenta. Plus, he thinks its immune system is helping my T-cells, whatever they are, become resistant to the virus, and ... Oh, Clark! He couldn't find any trace of antibodies in my blood on my last two tests.

"You mean..."

"I'm no longer HIV positive. He says I'm cured. I'm going to be fine, and our baby is going to be fine!"

Clark carefully took the glass of milk out of Lois's hand, and placed it and his wineglass on the table. He gently wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her tenderly. The kiss quickly escalated, becoming more and more passionate. A minute later, they broke apart, each one panting slightly. She tugged at his hands. "Let's go upstairs."

He smiled. "In a minute. I have to do something first."

"What?"

"This." He pulled his hands from hers, and picked his wineglass up once again. His voice was husky with emotion. "To Lois Lane. You're my wife, my partner, my lover, and the mother of my child. I love you more and more each day. You're my heart and my soul. I look forward

to growing old with you." He took a sip from his glass and then put it down before gathering her carefully into his arms. Kissing her all the while, he tenderly carried her up the stairs.

Lois and Clark paused in the lobby of the Delaware Hotel. The stately building looked festive tonight, in honour of the Kerth awards. Clark turned to his wife. "Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded firmly. "Let's do it."

He grinned and helped her off with her coat. It only took him a moment to check it in at the cloakroom and then he was back by her side. He proffered his arm to her, she took it, and side by side, they entered the large hall where the awards ceremony was being held.

It didn't take long for the entire room to fall silent. All eyes were on them. Identical looks of astonishment were on their peers' faces. Even Perry and Jimmy were frozen in place.

Lois grinned cheekily, and pulled her arm out of Clark's. "What's the matter with everyone? Haven't you seen a pregnant woman before?" She twirled in place, showing off her maternity dress.

A hubbub of noise started. Lois and Clark beamed as they acknowledged the congratulatory shouts.

Jimmy and Perry rushed to their side. Jimmy was grinning from ear to ear as he gave Clark a friendly clout on the shoulder. "Way to go, CK!" Catching sight of Lois's mock glare, he back-pedalled furiously. "Oh, yeah. Um, way to go too, Lois," he finished lamely.

"Lois, honey. Clark. I can't believe you two kept this a secret. Why in Elvis's name didn't you tell us?" Perry kissed Lois's cheek and pumped Clark's hand furiously.

"We wanted to wait until we were sure there weren't any problems, Chief," Clark responded as he tried to get his hand back from his boss.

The pair of them fielded many more compliments as the cocktail hour progressed. Clark didn't know how Lois was handling it. All the attention was wearing him out, and he had the superpowers in the family. How in the world was Lois coping?

Lois was having the time of her life. Her exhilaration at Dr. Klein's news, combined with her true excitement over the baby, gave her a feeling of euphoria and triumph that she had never experienced, ever. She was enjoying working the room like she never had before. All too soon, it was time for everyone to take their seats and be served their dinners. The conversation at the Planet table was lively. Everyone was thrilled by Lois and Clark's news.

Finally, the moment of truth arrived. The awards presentations commenced.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the press. We are gathered here together to honour those of our peers who have achieved true excellence in

journalism. Too many remember the 'who, what, where, and how' and forget to ask 'why'. Too many..."

Blah, blah, blah. Lois tuned out the master of ceremonies opening speech. She had heard it all before. He caught her attention again, only near the end of his opening remarks.

"...discovered an error to be corrected. There will be a special presentation at the end of the awards ceremony to rectify this grievous error."

"What was that all about?" Lois whispered to her boss.

"I'm not sure. No one told me about anything out of the ordinary," Perry whispered back.

As the night proceeded, it became clear that tonight belonged to the Daily Planet. Jimmy won the Photojournalism award for his dramatic photo of Superman performing a mid-air rescue of a hot air balloon that had sprung a leak and started heading for some power lines.

Clark had to smile as he remembered that rescue. The passengers had been frantically trying to lighten the balloon's load, and as he swooped up from under the basket, he had been pelted with champagne bottles, picnic baskets, shoes, and other items of clothing. He had laughed at the time, wondering exactly how much a bra really did weigh.

Ralph won for his coverage of the Supermodel scandal. Much as Ralph could be a total boor in person, he was a surprisingly good writer. Lois smirked as he accepted his award. Who had told him that a plaid cummerbund was a good fashion statement? He had also brought his mother as his date. Again. But he really had done a surprisingly good job on his story about underage Supermodels being exploited by being forced to work incredibly long and rigorous hours only to have their parents pocket their pay.

Clark and Lois won too, of course. They grinned triumphantly as they accepted the award for their story on the international baby smuggling ring that they had uncovered.

Finally the last award was handed out, and the master of ceremonies stepped back up to the podium.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Nine years ago, a grievous error was made by the Kerth Awards committee. It was made in all innocence. The committee had no idea until this year that the error had been made. Nevertheless, we at the Kerth Awards are grateful for this opportunity to right a wrong. I would like to introduce someone to you, who last stood upon this stage nine years ago to accept an award, and left Metropolis soon after. Without further ado, please give a round of applause to Monsieur Claude Parizeau."

Lois's hands made it up out of her lap to applaud, before she fully comprehended what she had just heard. She stopped mid clap. It took Clark a moment longer before he realised who had been introduced. He half rose out of his chair. Perry grabbed his arm, and tried to haul him back down again. Lois glanced at Clark in shock. His face was dark red, congested with blood. She had never seen him so angry. She

pulled on his other arm, and hissed, "It's okay, honey. Remember, he can't hurt us ever again. Everything's okay." She could feel Clark's muscles relax under her hand as he sat back down to her and Perry's relief.

A very skeletal stooped-over man stepped out onto the stage and shuffled to the podium. A thin murmur of sound arose from the audience to greet his appearance. Lois could feel some of the oldtimers who had known about her relationship with Claude, turn and focus on her. She felt trapped by the weight of their attention. She would have preferred to leave, and not have to sit there listening, but it didn't seem to be an option.

"Bonjour Mesdames et Messieurs. It is a plaisir to be here with you ce soir. Pardon my English s'il vous plait, it has been a long time since I have the language spoken."

Lois was shocked at his cadaverous appearance. He had been so handsome, so debonair. It was impossible to look at this wreck of a man and see any shadow of who he once had been. She had barely registered his appearance at the Planet the other week; she had been so upset that she hadn't even been able to look at him then.

"Je suis ici, I am here tonight to correct une erreur that happened nine years ago this night."

"Imagine, if you please, I worked at the Daily Planet over nine years ago. I worked, and the Daily Planet, it hired, who was younger, and meilleure, I mean better than me. I hit a time with no stories, how do you call it, a dry spell? And this tres jeune, very young woman, she finds a story. Such a story. Safety violations were covered up at the nuclear generating plant of the Metropolis Power and Light. All of this, it has been done just to save money. Pas d'autre raison. I hear about this story, and moi, I know, this story will win an award, it will win an award not for me, but for this very young woman. I did something then, something vraiment horrible. I stole this story. I was a thief in the night, and I took it, and I won the award."

Claude paused and looked at Lois for the first time since he entered the room. "I stole this story from Lois Lane. Je suis ici, I am here to ask her to me pardonner, forgive me for cette insulte horrible. I apologise to you, Lois Lane. And I apologise to the Daily Planet who were my employers. I apologise to the Kerth Awards, and I apologise to everyone here tonight." He looked back at the audience. "I am coming to the end of ma vie, my life. Soon, I shall be mort, dead. I am sick. It is a thing vraiment horrible, to look back over your life, and to see beaucoup de choses terribles, terrible things, that you wish had not happened. I am here tonight to try to fix one of those horrible erreurs that I have made in my life." Claude paused and nodded at someone offstage. The master of ceremonies returned and handed him a Kerth statuette. Claude turned back to Lois and addressed her once again. "Lois, I do not think you can be forgiving me, but one thing I can do is this." He extended the statuette towards her as she sat frozen and unbelieving in the crowd. "Lois, this belongs to you. I want you to take this from me. It is yours, not mine."

The crowd cheered loudly and enthusiastically. One of the Metropolis Star reporters who had had a few too many was the first to start but

it didn't take the rest of the audience long to join in. "Lo-is, Lo-is," they chanted as they clapped in time.

Lois looked around helplessly. Perry jumped to his feet. He grinned from ear to ear and smacked his two hands together as hard as he could. Jimmy was a split second later following, and that was enough to set the rest of the room off. It only took a few seconds for the entire room to stand, and give Lois a standing ovation.

Lois turned and looked at Clark. His earlier anger was gone. He smiled at her tenderly, an oasis of calm in the midst of the chaos, and laid his hand gently against her cheek. She searched his face carefully, looking for any remnant of his earlier fury, but found nothing more than approval and pride. He got to his feet, and extended his hand to her. Feeling as though she were in a dream, Lois grasped his hand and allowed him to pull her to an upright position. She turned to face the stage, and had to consciously tell her feet to move, one foot in front of the other. The crowd parted reluctantly in front of her. Her friends and colleagues were jostling each other, trying to get closer to her, and pass on their congratulations, but Lois felt curiously untouched by all of them. It seemed to take forever for her to reach the stairs leading up to the podium, but she finally arrived, and carefully started to ascend to the stage.

Clark watched his wife as she made her slow progress towards the podium. His heart was so full of love for her, he felt as though it would burst. He alone of all the people in the room, knew exactly what this moment meant to her. As she climbed the steps, the crowd of wellwishers fell back, and she walked alone, straight and proud.

Clark turned his eyes to Claude Parizeau. He admitted to himself that he was curious. Lois had long ago told him the whole story of her failed relationship with him, and Clark had wondered many times what kind of man Claude actually was. He had told himself in the past that in spite of everything, there must have been something good about him for Lois to have had feelings for the man.

Clark watched as Claude's eyes focused on Lois's expanded waistline. A look of horror came over the man's face, and what little colour he had in his cheeks drained quickly away. "Enceinte? Elle est enceinte? Ah non, pas encore. Mon Dieu, qu'est-ce que j'ai fait?" Clark could clearly hear the strangled whisper and his mind automatically translated it into English.

Clark was hemmed in at his table; everyone was still standing and applauding, and he could only watch helplessly as the man collapsed limply onto the floor of the stage, looking like nothing so much as a heap of discarded rags.

"He's in the end stage of AIDS, Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent," Dr. Aaronson said.

Clark glanced at his wife in worry. She was very pale, and subdued. "How long?" she asked softly.

"A month, maybe two." Dr. Aaronson folded his hands together, and

stared down at his entwined fingers. "You know, having to tell someone that they are going to die, that's my least favourite part of the job, but it wasn't hard with this man. He seems ready to go, somehow - as if he's made his peace with the world." He looked back up at the reporters. "Do you know if he has any family that we should contact?"

Clark shrugged and looked at Lois.

"I don't know. He ... I... Uh, he's an old ... friend from a long time ago. I haven't seen him for nine years. I don't remember him saying anything about a family."

"Don't worry about it. We'll ask him about it when he comes to," the doctor said briskly as he got up from his desk, tacitly bringing the meeting to a close.

Lois and Clark spent the next half hour sitting at Claude Parizeau's bedside. Their conversation couldn't help but be stilted. Lois studied the sick man's face, and thought back to her relationship with this man. Once he had meant everything to her, but try as she might, she couldn't remember what that had been like or how she had felt.

Clark watched Lois watch Claude. He knew that his wife returned his own feelings with her whole heart and soul, but he couldn't help but be curious as to what she was feeling now for the man on the bed.

Finally Claude rallied a bit, and opened his eyes.

Lois got up from her chair, and moved to the side of the bed.

"Hello, Claude," she said softly.

"Lois?" His eyes shifted from her face to her abdomen. He tentatively stretched out a shaking hand towards her, and his eyes shifted back to her face again. Tears shone in his eyes.

Lois responded to the silent question on his face. "Claude, I'm okay. I'm not HIV positive." It wasn't the whole answer to his question, but it was what he needed to know.

She watched in alarm as the man buried his head in his hands, and started to sob. "Mon Dieu! Merci! Je te remercie. Tu as bien repondu a mes prieres."

Lois gently placed her hand on his shoulder only to recoil in alarm from his panicky screech.

"Ne me touche pas!" He repeated the words over and over.

Lois looked blankly at Clark, not understanding what Claude had just said to her.

"He doesn't want you to touch him," Clark told her in a subdued tone of voice. "I think he's afraid of infecting you."

"Oh." Lois looked helplessly at Claude for a moment, and then moved

back to her position on the chair beside Clark. Her heart was wrenched by the pitiful sobs coming from the prone figure on the bed.

After a few minutes, when the sobbing showed no sign of abating, and in fact was getting worse, Clark moved. He got up from his chair, went to the supply cupboard in the corner of the room, and rummaged inside. He matter of factly pulled on a pair of disposable plastic gloves, and poured a glass of water. He moved back to the bed, and placed his hand on Claude's shoulder.

"Monsieur Parizeau?"

"Ne me touchez pas! Ne me touchez pas!"

"Monsieur! Regardez moi. J'ai des gants en latex." "Attendez-moi. Vous devez vous arreter de faire tout cela." "Voila, un verre d'eau. Alors, permettez-moi de vous aider a boire.

Claude raised his tear-ravaged face out of his hands and reached out a shaking hand for the glass. Clark gently pulled him upright, and supporting him with one arm, carefully placed the water glass against the man's lips. Claude sipped at the water, but choked, sputtered and coughed, spraying his mouthful of water liberally all over himself.

Lois started to move towards the two men, but Clark warned her off with a glance.

It took a few more uncomfortable moments, but Clark finally had Claude calmed down and sipping his water. Clark returned to the supply cupboard, and got out a clean hospital gown.

"Lois, would you mind waiting outside? I'm going to help Monsieur Parizeau change into a dry gown, and then I'll call you back in."

Lois nodded, and turned to leave the room. She didn't move fast enough though. As her husband started to strip off the sodden gown, she saw that Claude's emaciated torso was covered with red, raw looking lesions. She felt a pang of remorse and pity shoot through her heart.

Lois waited in the hallway. She could hear her husband's voice murmuring soothingly, interspersed with emotional outbursts from Claude. What were they saying to each other? She pressed her ear against the door, only to discover that they were conversing in fluent, rapid-fire French. Lois pushed herself away from the door with a muttered curse.

It was hard for her to believe that the man in the hospital room had once been her lover, her first lover - in fact, her only lover prior to Clark. There wasn't much about him that she recognised other than his speech. When they had been together, all he had had to do was open his mouth, and talk with that sexy French accent, and she had melted. He still sounded the same, but that was the only thing about him that was unchanged.

Clark opened the door to the room, and gestured to Lois to come back in. She entered to find Claude in a semi-upright position, wearing a

clean gown, with the sheets straightened on the bed, and pillows behind his head. Not for the first time, she thought that Clark would have made a good nurse. He was always wonderful when she was sick.

Lois sat back down beside the bed. Clark stood behind her, resting his hands lightly on her shoulders. She patted one of his now gloveless hands, thankful for his support.

"Claude, I want to thank you for what you did at the Kerths tonight. I never expected... I never thought..."

Claude smiled wanly at her. "I needed to do it, Lois. I needed to make my peace with you before I die."

"That's what you wanted to say to me, isn't it? When you phoned, when you came to the Planet?"

"Yes, but I do not blame you for not wanting to talk to me."

Clark spoke up. "Can't they give you the heavy duty antibiotics? I heard they've had good results with the combination therapy."

"Non, I am allergic to the drugs. They would make me dead sooner." Claude looked back at Lois with a sly smile. "Lois, I like your husband. He is a good man. A much better man than me, non?"

"No, I mean, yes, he is, Claude." Lois giggled and smiled back at him. How strange it was for her to be sitting here talking to this man in front of her husband. It didn't feel real to her.

Claude closed his eyes, and leaned back into his pillows, a small smile still playing about his lips. He spoke without opening his eyes. "I prayed to the bon Dieu, Lois. I prayed that you were not sick, that I had not given you this illness. I am so happy for this, and so sorry for what I did to you before."

"Why did you do it, Claude? Why did you steal my story?" Lois leaned forward in her chair, watching him intently.

He frowned, then opened his eyes to face her. "I don't know, Lois. I feel like I was a different person then. When I got sick, it changed my thinking. I think I was afraid. Afraid that you were passing me by, that you were meilleure, better than me. Toute ma vie, all my life, I have been scared, first of this, and then of that," he gesticulated wildly as he spoke, "and then of this again. Now that I know I am not being of this world for much longer, I am stopped being scared."

Lois's eyes filled with tears. "I'm glad that you're not scared, Claude."

"Merci, Lois."

Clark spoke up again. "Do you have any family that you want us to contact for you, Claude? Are you married?"

Claude sighed heavily. "Ma mere et mon pere sont morts. Yes, I am married. But my wife, she will be cheering if you are calling her. She hates me."

"I'm sure that she doesn't..." Clark started to protest.

"Mais oui," Claude interrupted. "She hates me since the time mon petit fils, my son, he died..." Claude sat up and grimly looked Clark straight in the eyes, "of the AIDS."

"Oh." Lois's hand fluttered up to cover her open mouth. A tear slowly slid down her cheek. She had expended so much time and energy hating this man, but she had never imagined anything like this.

Claude turned back to Lois. "Mon petit Michel, he is waiting for me, Lois. Do not be sad for him or for me. I want to see my Michel again." He leaned back again, and closed his eyes once more. Keeping his eyes closed, he continued, "Et maintenant, Lois et Clark, je suis tres fatigue. I am very tired."

Lois jumped to her feet. "Oh, yes," she said awkwardly. "I guess I'll say goodnight then. Thank you, Claude."

"You are welcome, Lois."

"Good night, Claude," Clark said softly.

"Bonne nuit, Clark. It was a plaisir, a pleasure to meet you. You are a good man. That is what Lois is deserving."

"Thank you."

The two reporters moved to the door. Lois paused and looked back at the sick man on the bed. "Claude? I... Thank you, Claude."

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "You are welcome, Lois. I am very sorry."

"I know. I... It's all right. Good night, Claude," Lois repeated.

"Good night, and goodbye, Lois."

Lois and Clark entered their home, locked the door behind them, and hung up their coats. They moved in silence to the living room, and there they each put a Kerth Award down onto the coffee table. Lois looked at the Kerth she had been carrying. It still bore the inscription 'Awarded to Claude Parizeau'.

"Clark, for nine years, I knew... I knew that this award really belonged to me. I told myself, and anyone else who would listen that this had been stolen from me. But Clark, I never wanted to get it like this. I never wanted Claude to go through such pain."

Clark stood behind her, and wrapped his arms tightly around her. "I know, sweetie, I know."

"It's strange, you know. I've hated that man for nine years. I've built him up in my head to be this evil monster who was bent and determined on making my life miserable, and he's just a man, an ordinary man."

"I know. He's not bad per se, he's weak."

"Exactly. Or rather, he **was** weak. He's not like that now. It must have taken him so much courage to come here, first to warn me, and then to ..." she gestured at the statuette, "...to do that!"

"You know something? I actually liked him, a little bit."

Lois twisted in Clark's arms to face him. "So did I. Does that bother you?"

Clark smiled at her tenderly, and kissed her forehead gently. "No, of course not. So, honey, how do you feel right now?"

Lois looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure, Clark. Like I just said, I've thought about Claude as this evil person for years now, and suddenly I feel sorry for him. I'm very sad for him. It must have been horrible for him, to lose his son, and his marriage. I'm grateful that I'm not going to have to go through anything like that. I feel ... I feel very, very mixed up." A huge yawn took her by surprise. "And very tired. Clark, more than anything, I feel very tired. It's been a long night."

Clark carefully scooped his wife up into his strong arms and headed for the stairs. "Allow me, honey. Door to door service. That's my motto."

Lois laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes blissfully. "Mmm, my hero, thank you. You're so good to me."

"I try. I love you."

"I love you too, Clark," she mumbled into his neck.

The next day, Clark managed to drag himself out of bed at seven a.m. to call Perry. His boss was very understanding when he was told that his two star reporters were taking the morning off. Clark then crawled back into bed with his wife. Lois was so tired that she didn't even stir at his movements. A few hours later they had slept themselves out, but neither one felt particularly well rested. The events of last night had been such an emotional roller coaster, they were both still exhausted.

Clark had one of his patented, high-speed showers as per usual, and then made breakfast while Lois washed and got dressed. By the time she came down the stairs to the kitchen, the table was set, and Clark had just finished making oatmeal.

"Good morning, sweetheart,"

"Morning, honey." Lois pecked her husband on the cheek as he dished out a couple of bowls of food. "Mmm, oatmeal. My favourite." Lois appreciatively inhaled the steam rising from her bowl. "It's one of the few things that I know how to make, but somehow, yours always tastes better than mine."

Clark hurriedly turned away, valiantly trying to hide his smile at

her words. He poured two glasses of orange juice while Lois used the controller to turn on the small TV set.

"...And now in local news, last night's Kerth Awards was the scene for unprecedented human drama..."

Clark and Lois exchanged shocked looks, as he moved quickly back to the table.

Their oatmeal grew cold while they watched the rest of the story. LNN handled the story well, reporting accurately on what had actually happened, but it didn't make it any more comfortable for Lois and Clark to see their faces plastered on the TV screen.

When the story was over, Lois looked down at her uneaten, cold oatmeal. "Honey, would you mind?" she asked gesturing at the bowl.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, right." Clark's eyes took on a slight red tinge for a split second, and then steam starting wafting gently out of her bowl. Lois added a little milk to her bowl, picked up her spoon, stirred in the liquid, and started eating slowly, while thinking furiously. "It wasn't a bad story, was it?"

"No," Clark replied.

"And they were fair, weren't they?"

"More than fair, I thought."

"They were very nice, talking about the error that had been made."

"I agree."

"And they said great things about my reporting skills."

"Yes, they did."

"So...I guess this is one time where I should be happy that I was on the news."

Clark grinned at her. "I guess so. Honey, I'm so proud of you."

Lois tried to lean over the small kitchen table to kiss him, but caught her slightly bulging belly on the edge. "Ouch!"

"You okay?"

"I'm fine." She patted her stomach. "It's just going to take me time to get used to this."

In a flash, Clark scooped her up, and settled her onto his lap. Caressing her stomach, he said, "I'm already used to it. I love how you look. I can't wait to see you get bigger and bigger."

Lois smiled. "Will you still feel that way when I'm like a beached whale?"

He wagged his eyebrows at her suggestively. "Hey, if you're beached, you won't be able to get away from me."

She giggled. "As if I wanted to." Lois wrapped her arms around Clark possessively. "I love you, Clark."

"I love you, Lois." He kissed her tenderly before standing up, and dumping her off his lap.

"Hey!"

"It's getting late. I told Perry we would be in by noon. You go get ready, and I'll clean up in here."

"All right. But I have to tell you, it's a real shock to the system. One minute you're kissing me, and the next you're talking about ..." Still grumbling, Lois left the kitchen. Clark grinned in appreciation, and then flashed around the room, cleaning and tidying. Less than 10 seconds later, the kitchen was immaculate.

Work almost seemed like a sanctuary by the time they got there. It had been a huge shock to the system when they had left the safety of their house. Clark had held open the front door for Lois in his normal courtly fashion. Consequently she had been the first to emerge into the maelstrom. Cameras flashed, and questions were hurled at the two reporters from the small group of tabloid photographers camped out on their front sidewalk.

Top Copy had a camera crew there as well as "In Your Face with Barry Dunning". Barry Dunning himself hurled questions at her along with the others. "Is it true, Ms. Lane, that Mr. Parizeau has infected you with AIDS, and you, your baby and your husband are all going to die a horrible, lingering death?"

Lois flushed red, and then turned white with repressed fury. Clark prudently wrapped his arms around his diminutive warrior woman, and held on tight. He shouted, "No comment!" as he dragged his wife away from the camera crew.

By the time the two intrepid reporters reached the newsroom, they were absolutely livid. They had stopped at the kiosk downstairs, and purchased as many tabloids as they could find - all featuring stories about Claude, Lois and Clark. The headlines were lurid, and the stories ranged from the three of them having been in a love triangle together and now they all had AIDS, to Clark and Claude duelling it out over Lois, to having the parentage of Lois's child questioned. The only bright spot to the whole thing - thankfully, this was one occasion where the tabloids hadn't dragged Superman into the mix.

Lois and Clark were too furious and involved in their reading to note the worried faces of their colleagues who scattered when they saw the two of them approaching.

Perry approached them, his own copies of the tabloids in hand when both their phones rang. Perry motioned that he would be back in a minute as they answered their calls a split second apart. Clark only had time to hear, "Calm down, Mother!" before saying, "Clark Kent."

"Mr. Kent?" said the soft, quavering, feminine voice on the other end of the line. "It's Jen Vandenburg, Corey's mother. Did he...is he there by any chance? With you and Ms. Lane?"

"No, why? Isn't he in school?"

"No. I'm worried about him. He's been really upset since, well, since he read all those articles about Ms. Lane and Mr. Parizeau. He stormed out of here. I don't know where he went."

"Maybe I could contact Superman, and he could go out..." Clark's voice trailed off into silence as he spotted the object of their conversation getting off the elevator. "Never mind, Mrs. Vandenburg. He's here, just walked in."

"Thank God! Would you talk to him for me? He just won't talk to me. I think he'll open up to you two more."

"Of course, and Lois and I will make sure he gets home okay. We'll drive him, all right?"

"Thank you, Mr. Kent."

Clark could hear the sincere relief in her voice. He said goodbye quickly, and got to Lois's desk at the same time as Corey did.

Corey was extremely agitated. Without even waiting for Lois to get off the phone, he blurted out, "I read he's dying - that man who hurt you - of AIDS. Are you dying too?"

The noise level in the newsroom plummeted away to nothing. Clark could see Perry frozen in place on the other side of the room. Jimmy looked on, whitefaced. Even Ralph looked upset.

Lois's jaw dropped. She looked helplessly at Clark, and then at the receiver still clutched in her hand. "We'll have lunch, mother. Got to go," she managed to sputter into the phone before she got up from her desk.

"Come on, Corey, Clark. Let's move this discussion someplace more private." She led the way into the conference room, with Corey following blindly behind her. As Clark closed the door, he smiled reassuringly at Jimmy, Perry, and their other colleagues. Their expressions lightened, although they still looked quite worried.

Lois braced her hands on the table, and faced Corey. "No, I'm not dying. And yes, he does have AIDS."

Corey inhaled a great shuddering breath. "Thank God. I was so worried about you. I was afraid."

Lois sat down, and motioned to the chair across from her. "I'm okay. Really."

Corey threw himself down into his chair. Clark sat down beside Lois, taking her hand in his, content to silently watch the interaction.

Corey looked at her with an odd, tight expression on his face. "You must be happy."

"Yes, I'm very glad that I'm okay. We were worried. I could have contracted the illness, but," she looked at Clark, and squeezed his hand tightly, "thankfully, I didn't." Not the whole truth, she reflected, but only what she was willing to share.

"No, that's not what I meant." At Lois and Clark's identical questioning looks, Corey continued, "You must be so happy that he's going to die! I'd be happy if I were you. I wish Mr. Collins would die. I hate him so much!" He pounded the table in emphasis.

Lois looked at Clark, speechless, completely overwhelmed by the depth of Corey's emotions.

Clark managed to pull himself together, and earnestly addressed the boy, "We don't hate Claude, Corey. He asked Lois to forgive him, and she did."

Corey jumped to his feet. "How could you? After all the things he did to you? He hurt you! It was in all the papers. I figured it out, you know. I figured out that he's the one you talked about before."

"Yes, he is, Corey, and yes, he did hurt me, but a lot of how I felt after, it was my own fault."

Even Clark looked a little askance at Lois as she struggled to verbalise these thoughts.

"Corey, please sit back down, and listen to me. I told you a little of what happened. This man, Claude, he and I had a personal relationship with each other, and he stole my story, and set me up to look as though I were lying when I accused him of it. Well, that's not all that happened. I closed off from people, stopped trusting them, stopped trusting myself. I lost a lot of my confidence, and I honestly don't know if I would have recovered it on my own. Clark was the one who broke through my defenses, and got me to face my fears." Lois smiled lovingly at her husband before continuing. "I won't deny that Claude did a really horrible thing. In fact, *he* doesn't deny that he did a really horrible thing, but that didn't mean that everyone was going to do the same thing to me. I was the one who isolated myself from the world, not Claude. I was responsible for my own actions. I've been thinking about this a lot since yesterday. And I'm going to tell you something else. I can see again just why I had feelings for him. And I can see that he's not a monster, but just a man. Does that make sense to you, Corey?"

"No! It doesn't! I don't understand! He did something bad to you, and he needs to pay for it. I'm glad he's dying. I hope he burns in hell, and I wish he would take Mr. Collins with him." Corey jumped to his feet and fled the room.

Lois watched him leave with tears in her eyes. "Oh, Clark, he's so young. He just doesn't get it."

Clark cupped her cheek in his hand. "He might not get it but I do. You're amazing." He bent his mouth to hers and kissed her lightly. "I better run. I promised his mom on the phone that I would make sure

that he got home okay. I think Superman better go and make sure that happens. Don't worry about him. Right now, he's upset because he's identifying with you, and you're not reacting the way he wants you to." He dashed out of the room, and headed for the stairs.

Lois emerged from the conference room, only to find herself face to face with a sea of worried faces. Perry stepped forward out of the crowd. "Lois, honey, is there, uh, is there something you need to be telling us?"

"...I'm telling you, Lois. If I hadn't felt so sorry for Corey, I would have laughed. You should have seen Henderson in the middle of it all. The man was positively glowing, which I have to say, is a look I've never seen on him before. He has it bad for Mrs. Vandenburg, and what's even more surprising, I think she's got a thing for him too." Clark snuggled a little closer to Lois's back.

Lois giggled. "I just wish I had been there. I can just picture Inspector Henderson hovering around Corey's mom, worried that Superman was horning in on his territory, all jealous and anxious." Lois pushed at the covers, feeling too hot. She had been feeling too warm ever since she got pregnant. It was worse in bed with Clark supplying her with an ample amount of body heat - in more ways than one. Clark responded to her unspoken plea, and lightly blew a cooling breeze over her. "Oh, thanks, honey! I'm glad that Henderson is taking an interest in Corey though. Do you think he'll open up to him?" Lois twisted and shifted about until she was comfortable, with Clark in just the right position around her, his hand resting lightly on her tummy.

"I'm afraid not. Even 'Superman' wasn't able to get through to him, and you know how he feels about him, er, me." Clark closed his eyes and nuzzled Lois's hair. He was tired. So was she. It had been an emotional couple of days for the two of them.

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"What was that?" Clark asked, as he spread his fingers wide across Lois's stomach.

"You felt it too?"

They fell silent again, concentrating on that brief, fluttery motion that they had sensed more than they had felt.

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Lois twisted to look Clark in the eyes. "It is! It's our baby!"

Clark grinned from ear to ear. His eyes shone with emotion as he kissed his wife passionately. Suddenly, he didn't feel so tired anymore. And from the abandoned way Lois was responding to his embrace, neither did she.

Clark was thankful that he and Lois both had the next day off. The two of them still felt emotionally exhausted. Their emotions had been on a wild roller coaster ride, and now it was time to regroup, and replenish their energy.

Clark positively loved the domestic routine that they had established early in their marriage. He normally did the grocery shopping on his own; it just wasn't something that interested Lois. Plus, Clark sometimes took advantage of his special abilities, and did some of his shopping in more exotic locales than Metropolis.

But they did dust and vacuum together. Clark would either float up to the tops of cabinets and bookcases or he would scoop a laughing Lois up and she would do the honours. Clark always made a point of doing some of the less glamorous housework himself, cleaning the bathroom and washing the floors. After all, it only took him a few seconds and he would have had to give up Lois's company for a lot longer if she did that kind of work.

His favourite shared household chore though, was folding the clean laundry. It was a very cozy activity. Clark liked to tease Lois as they folded her lingerie, all wisps and snippets of lace and satin. Admittedly, things had changed in that department recently. Her underwear was industrial sized and plain cotton now - not as exciting in one way, but very satisfying in the other knowing that it was their baby that had precipitated the change. As he folded a pair of her new underwear, he opened his mouth in preparation for teasing her, but thought better of it when he saw the pensive look on her face.

"What's wrong, honey?"

Lois looked up with a start. "What? Oh. I'm sorry, Clark. I was just thinking..."

"About what?"

Lois looked away from him for a moment, before turning back to him, her expression resolute. "I think... I want to go and visit Claude." She visibly braced herself, obviously prepared for a negative reaction from her husband.

"I think that's a great idea, honey," Clark replied mildly.

"You do?"

Clark nodded in response. "I feel sorry for him too, honey. He's dying and he's all alone. I think we should go. It's the right thing to do."

"Oh, I'm so glad. I was afraid, I mean..."

"You were afraid that I'd be jealous," Clark stated.

Lois squirmed a bit under the weight of his gaze. "Yeah, I guess so."

Clark dropped the clean laundry he was holding back into the basket, and pulled his wife into his side. "I'm not jealous. I know that you love me. But I also know that you once had feelings for Claude, and

they haven't completely disappeared, although you probably had them buried pretty deep."

Lois tilted her head up to look him in the eyes. She lifted her hand to stroke his cheek. "How did you get to be so smart?"

Clark laughed as he hugged her close. "I had to get smart just to keep up with you."

Over the course of the next few weeks, Lois and Clark established a new routine in their lives. They made a point of visiting with Claude every day, either in the afternoon or in the early evening. He was pathetically grateful for the company although he tried to hide it. He was so paranoid about infecting Lois and Clark that he insisted that they put on a gown and gloves just to sit beside his bed. Lois and Clark both protested repeatedly that it was impossible to be infected with the AIDS virus by casual contact, but he was adamant about it. As the weeks progressed, Lois and Clark watched his condition slowly deteriorate.

Corey was still refusing to talk to either Lois, Clark or Superman. Superman made a point of checking in with Inspector Henderson from time to time, only to learn that Corey was also refusing to talk to him. The police officer informed them that there would be a hearing in about a month to deal with Keith Collins and with the other three conspirators.

A month later, Corey sat by himself in the courtroom and watched as the judge dealt with the four men who had victimized him. Thankfully the four of them had pled guilty so he didn't have to testify. His mom, Lois and Clark, and Inspector Henderson had all offered to accompany him, but he hadn't wanted their company. No, he wanted Superman to be there with him, but Superman hadn't offered and Corey hadn't asked. As he looked around the courtroom once more, he realised that the Super-hero must have had something better to do than to hang around with a kid he barely knew.

Clark squeezed Lois's hand as he watched the images emerge on the video screen. "Lois, I can't believe it. We can even see the heart beating."

"And can you see my bladder about to explode, Clark?" asked Lois sarcastically. "You should try drinking your weight in water, and then have somebody squash your bladder. And you might be able to see the heart beating but you're hogging the screen so I can't see, and oh!" she exclaimed as Clark turned the screen to face her a little better. "Is that a foot?" She pointed at the screen.

Dr. Klein grinned as he continued to run the video wand through the goop on Lois's abdomen. "Yes, it is. And look here." He moved the wand to a different position. "He or she is sucking its thumb."

Lois and Clark were mesmerised as they watched their baby. They could

see the small movements of the baby's throat as it sucked contentedly.

"Can you tell?" Clark asked hesitantly. "If it's a boy or a girl, I mean?"

Dr. Klein frowned in concentration. "No, I can't. The baby's at the wrong angle. But haven't you peeked?" He motioned at his eyes. "You could have with your 'you-know'."

Clark smiled. "I didn't want to. I was afraid of hurting the baby."

Dr. Klein chuckled. "Clark, I know that we call it x-ray vision, but it doesn't really use x-rays. You can peek all you want, and it won't do any harm."

"Hey," Lois protested. "Who said that I want to know ahead of time? I think I want to find out the old-fashioned way, okay?"

Clark smiled in reassurance. "That's fine with me, honey." He opened his mouth as if to say more when his beeper went off. He checked it and frowned.

Lois propped herself up on her elbows. "What is it?"

"Inspector Henderson paged me to call him. I think I better do that, okay."

"We're done here anyway, Clark. Your baby looks just fine. It's progressing just exactly the way it's supposed to." Dr. Klein grabbed a few handfuls of paper towels and started wiping the goop off of Lois's stomach as he spoke.

"You go ahead, Clark. I just have to...Oh! I really have to go to the bathroom!" Lois quickly clambered down from the examining table and scurried off towards the washroom, one hand clutching her paper gown closed at the back.

When she got back from her urgent errand, she discovered that Dr. Klein was alone in the lab. "What happened? Where's Clark?"

Dr. Klein handed her a note. "I'm not sure. He called Inspector Henderson, wrote you this, and took off in a flash."

Lois unfolded the note to find something very disturbing written in her husband's distinctive handwriting.

"Lois, honey, Sorry to dash off like this. Corey has evidently done some kind of major melt-down, and Inspector Henderson thinks that only Superman will be able to calm him down.

Not sure what time I'll be back to work.

Your loving husband, Clark

P.S. Wasn't the ultrasound exciting?"

Lois looked at Dr. Klein with a sour expression on her face. "I hate this. If I weren't pregnant, Clark would have probably taken me with

him."

Dr. Klein looked puzzled. "What does being pregnant have to do with it?"

"We read that it's not that safe for women to fly when they're pregnant."

Dr. Klein laughed. "That's in a pressurized aircraft, Lois. Plus, don't you remember what we established? Clark's aura protects you. You're perfectly safe flying with your husband."

"Great," Lois spat out angrily. "Now you tell me!"

It looked like Clark would have his hands more than full with Corey. The kid had indulged in a major rampage at the courthouse, armed with nothing more than his own two hands, and feet, and head, and the rest of his body. He had overturned benches, knocked over tables, dumped garbage cans, and otherwise created a major mess in the short period of time before he had been apprehended by the bailiffs. They had stuffed him into a cell to cool off. Judging from the eloquent swearing that Clark could hear coming from the direction of holding, he hadn't cooled off yet.

Inspector Henderson paced back in forth in front of the Super-hero, looking more agitated than Clark had ever seen him.

"I just don't know what to do, Superman. I swear, if I didn't love his mother, I would wring his neck."

"If you didn't WHAT?"

A wash of colour swept over Henderson's face. "If I didn't love his mother," he repeated.

Clark beamed at him. "Can I assume that the feeling is reciprocal?"

"Yeah," he replied bashfully as he looked down at the ground.

"That's great!" Clark exclaimed as he clapped the embarrassed police officer on the back. "Are you planning on marriage?"

"That all depends."

"Depends on what?" Clark asked.

They were interrupted by Corey screeching at the top of his lungs, cursing vehemently. It was so loud that it was clearly audible in the corridor outside Holding.

"Depends on him," Henderson answered glumly. "His mother's pretty worried, and listening to him, I am too."

"Well, let's see what I can do then." Clark squeezed Henderson's shoulder, and then the two men headed for the holding cell together.

"And what is this?" Claude pointed at the glossy abstract black and white photograph.

"That's the head," Lois announced proudly.

"It is?" Claude peered more closely at the picture. "Ah, well, uh, I'm sure it is very ... nice, Lois."

Lois laughed and put the ultrasound picture back in her purse. "Liar! But you're very diplomatic."

The door opened, and Clark came in. "Hi, honey!" He kissed Lois on the cheek, pulled up a chair and sat down beside Claude's bedside. "Sorry I'm late. How are you feeling today, Claude?"

"Pas mal, Clark, not bad. Lois was just showing me the pictures of the baby."

"Great. Fun, aren't they?"

Peering at Claude, the sick man realised that Clark's smile didn't touch his eyes. There was obviously something bothering him. "What has happened you today? You are not happy, I can see this."

Clark sighed, and ran his fingers through his hair. "No, I'm not happy. It was a frustrating day. Lois and I have a young friend. His name is Corey Vandenburg, and he's had quite a rough time lately. His father died last year in an accident. His mother was lost without him, and a teacher started molesting..."

With Lois's help, Clark covered Corey's troubled history in depth. Then, Lois fell silent while he brought the two listeners up to date on the day's events. "... So, since Mr. Collins pled guilty, and the judge thought that this showed remorse, he only sentenced Collins to 6 months in jail and he counted the time spent waiting for trial as part of that time. Then, he reduced the sentence by a third as Collins has been well behaved since he's been in custody, and well, anyway, the upshot is that Collins only has to serve one more week, and then he's out. The only bright spot in the whole scenario is that Collins has been prohibited from ever working with children again."

"Oh, no," Lois exclaimed. "No wonder Corey was upset."

Clark smiled grimly. "Upset is an understatement, Lois. The kid went ballistic, and in a way, I can't blame him. He trashed the courtroom singlehandedly. It took two bailiffs to control him, and, well, they couldn't control his mouth. I've never heard anyone swear so, so eloquently before. I wouldn't have believed that he even knew language like that!"

Claude was silent for a long time, lost in thought. He finally spoke up. "Bring him here."

"What?" Clark exclaimed.

"Bring him here. I want to talk to him."

"Why?" Lois asked.

Claude just shrugged. "Bring him here," he repeated.

"But he... You don't... I didn't tell you, but he's read the papers about you, and well, he hates you too." Lois protested. "He's lumped your um, prior treatment of me in with the abuse he suffered from his teacher."

"Bring him anyway."

Clark leaned forward to address Claude solemnly. "But you're sick. It might not have a good effect on you."

Claude smiled sardonically. "Clark, breathing does not have a good effect on me right now. Non, bring him. I am asking you to trust me."

Lois and Clark exchanged meaningful glances. "All right," Clark finally responded. "I don't think this is a good idea, but we're running out of options with this kid. We'll bring him with us tomorrow."

"Bien!" Briskly changing the subject, Claude continued, "And now then, tell me, mes amis, have you been thinking of any names for your petit enfant, your baby?"

It had taken a lot of fast talking for Lois and Clark to convince Mrs. Vandenburg that Corey should accompany them to the hospital. Their self-imposed task hadn't been made any easier by the fact that neither one of them had any kind of clue what Claude planned on saying to the kid. But, fast talking being one of their major talents, they were able to show up at the hospital early the next evening with Corey in tow.

"So, you are Corey," Claude said cheerfully. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Claude Parizeau, and I am an old friend of Lois's and a new friend of Clark's."

"Ha! Like hell you're a friend of theirs! I read about you, I know what you did to her. You stole her story, and you could have made her very sick. I read that you're dying, and I'm glad!" Corey was slumped sullenly in his chair, but his eyes blazed fire as he glared at the sick man in front of him.

Claude had waved Lois and Clark to chairs near the back of the room, and dismissed them from his attention. Instead he focused completely on the young and angry adolescent who was facing him. "Alors, bien. Ecoutez-moi. You read that I stole Lois's story, and that is vrai, true, but did what you were reading tell you why?"

At Corey's blank look, Claude continued, "I did not think so. It did not tell you the fear that I am feeling, did it? I was scared toute ma vie, all my life. I can not remember any time that I was not feeling fear. I was a world traveller, a good journalist. People liked me. I had lots of friends, didn't I, Lois?" He raised his voice to address her sitting in the back of the room.

She nodded silently in confirmation.

He turned back to Corey. "But I was never happy. I did love Lois Lane. But, I didn't love me, Claude Parizeau. I didn't love me because I was always scared. Scared of growing old, scared of someone being better than me like Lois was, scared of the world passing me by, scared of people finding out the truth about me. That was what was scaring me the most. I was scared of people finding out the truth about me."

In spite of his aggressively passive and uninterested stance, Corey found himself asking, "What truth? What were you scared that people would find out?"

"I was scared that people would know that I was only a fearful little boy on the inside. I was scared that people would learn about how weak I really was. I was scared that people would learn how unlovable I really was." Claude looked down at his hands laying limply in his lap before turning his gaze to the young boy in front of him. "I think you are scared too, Corey."

"No, I'm not," Corey protested.

"You would not have made such a fuss as you did if you were not."

"No, I was upset. Mr. Collins, he should pay for what he did to me."

"The judge thinks he has paid. For Mr. Collins, it is over. But is it over for you?"

"I...Of course it's over for me. I survived."

"But you haven't moved on. You are still a scared little boy who wants it to stop. But Corey, it has stopped. It is over," Claude said softly.

"I...I..."

"Corey, I do understand. It is your turn now. It is your turn to think that you too are unlovable. It is your turn to be afraid of being weak. But Corey, please, do not be living your life scared. Look at me. It took dying to give me the courage to fix my mistakes. It took dying to get me to the point that I could be opening up to people. It took dying," he looked warmly at both Clark and Lois, "to bring me friendship. It took dying before I could forgive myself for being weak. And it took dying before I could learn to be strong. Corey, don't wait until you're dying too. You need to live your life now. Don't wait for the future," Claude paused and harshly cleared his throat, "because the future might not happen."

"I shouldn't have let him... I shouldn't have let him touch me," Corey blurted out, tears shining in his eyes. "It's my fault."

"Non! He was a teacher, a man you respected. It was his fault. You are not to blame, Corey."

"I...I guess not. But my friends..."

"They all act like it was your choice?" Claude asked.

"Yeah."

"I can sympathise with you. Even the doctors and the nurses here, who know all about my illness, they are acting like I chose this, like I was wanting to get sick and to be dying. Do you know how I got sick, Corey?"

Corey silently shook his head.

"Neither do they. It could have been from an operation - I had to have a blood transfusion when I ... Mon ami, Clark, comment dit-on l'appendice?"

"Appendix."

"Ah, oui. Merci. I was having an operation for the appendix. There were complications and I needed a blood transfusion. Perhaps it was from the bad blood." He shrugged and continued, "Or, it could have been from all the, the loving that I did." Claude pointedly did not look at Lois during this conversation. "I don't know for sure, and they don't know either, but they blame me for my illness. So, my young friend, what I am trying to say is that it was not my choice to getting sick, or to be dying. And it was not your choice to be treated the way you were. But you are the lucky one, Corey. I can not choose to be getting better, but you, you can choose this for yourself."

The room fell silent while Corey, Clark and Lois thought about Claude's words. All this talk of blame reminded her of what that had felt like - the stigma she had felt when she knew that she had indeed been infected with the HIV virus. And it was shocking that even trained professionals were also quick to judge. They didn't blame cancer patients for getting that illness!

After another moment of silent contemplation, Lois spoke up from the back corner of the room. She held Clark's hand tightly as she talked. "Claude's right, Corey. You shouldn't live in fear. But one thing he didn't say, and I want to. You shouldn't live in hate either. Look at me. I spent nine years hating Claude for what he did to me, and now that I've given up my hate, I feel like a new woman. I'm not weighed down any more. I'm more open to others, not just to Clark" She took a second to smile lovingly at her husband before continuing. "I feel better about myself. I'm not saying that you shouldn't be angry at Mr. Collins, and I'm not saying that he shouldn't be punished, and I'm really not saying that he got enough time in jail because I don't think he did, but what I am saying is that you shouldn't hate him. If you do, you'll end up being influenced by him for your whole life, and if I were you, I wouldn't want to give him that satisfaction."

"I...You're right, Lois. But I don't know how to stop hating him. And I don't know how to stop being scared." Corey looked sadly at Lois. "I'm sorry, Lois. I said some pretty awful things to you before, and, well, I meant them at the time, but I guess I don't mean them now, and ..."

Lois smiled and held up her hand. "It's all right, Corey. I forgive you. That's what friends are for. And friends are also for helping. Give your friends a chance. Clark and I, and your mom, and Inspector Henderson, and Superman, we all want to help. Let us help. Okay?"

"Okay," he answered softly before turning back to Claude. "Thank you, Claude. You've given me a lot to think about. I don't know if I agree with everything you said, but, by saying it to me, you've helped me stop panicking and start thinking."

Claude wearily leaned back into his pillow and closed his eyes. "You are welcome, my friend. I am so glad that I could be of service."

Clark quietly addressed Lois and Corey, "Claude's pretty tired. Why don't you two head to the cafeteria for a drink, and I'll help him get settled for the night. I'll just be a couple of minutes."

"Sure, honey. Good idea." Lois gave her husband a quick peck on the cheek, and then left the room with Corey in tow.

Clark bustled about the room. He straightened Claude's bed, and closed the curtains. He looked at the peaceful figure lying on the bed and said softly, "I know you're not asleep."

Claude opened one eye and peeked at Clark. "I was thinking that I was a better actor than that."

"Oh, I think you would fool most people, but I'm pretty observant."

"Yes, you are, Clark."

Clark paused for a moment, wondering if he should ask his question or not. "It happened to you too, didn't it, Claude? You were molested too, weren't you?" he asked haltingly.

The sick man sighed heavily. "Oui, it was mon oncle, my uncle Claude; my parents named me for him. I was very young, and it was a long time ago."

"But you don't forget, do you?" Clark said quietly.

"Non, it's impossible to forget."

"I am sorry, Claude."

"It is okay. If it helped me today, if I said the right things to that young boy because of it, then it was worth it," Claude replied.

"No, it wasn't worth it. But yes, you did say the right things today. You did a good job, Claude." Clark patted the sick man on his shoulder.

"Merci, Clark."

"You're welcome, Claude."

The two men gazed at each other for a moment, enjoying their improbable friendship. Clark would never have guessed in a million years that he could be friends with someone who had once hurt his wife so terribly, but he found he treasured this friendship immensely.

"Do you want me to help you to the washroom now, Claude? Are you ready to brush your teeth, and wash, or do you want a nurse to help you later?"

"Later is fine, Clark. You go. You go and be with Lois, and your young friend, and your baby. You are a lucky man, Clark."

"I know, Claude. You're right again. I am a lucky man. Good night."

"Bonne nuit."

"Oh, that poor man," Lois said sympathetically as she hung her clothes in the closet.

"I know. It must have been awful for him."

"I wish I had known, you know, before. It wouldn't have changed anything but I might have been more forgiving, or more understanding, or something." She turned down the blankets and carefully slid onto the bed. Clark lay down beside her, propped himself up on one elbow and reached into his nighttable drawer. He pulled out a vial of liquid as Lois pushed her pyjama top up out of the way. Clark sat up and poured a small amount of fragrant oil into his hands, and briskly rubbed them together. When the oil was at a more comfortable temperature, he started massaging it gently into Lois's protruding stomach, paying particular attention to her small stretch marks.

"Mmm, that feels great, honey. And I haven't had another stretch mark since we started doing this." Lois was almost purring with contentment as she lounged lazily on the bed.

"I know, and I think these ones are starting to fade too," Clark replied as he peered closely at her stomach. He laughed as the lump in her belly shifted slowly from one side to the other and back again. "What does that feel like?"

"Um, hard to describe. It doesn't hurt, but it feels heavy, heavy in a good way, and well, it's funny, but I find it very comforting. Even when you're out, I'm not alone. I have built-in company. It feels good."

Clark laughed. "I hope it still feels good in three more months."

He dribbled more oil over her belly, and kept massaging.

"I wonder if that's why he treated me the way he did," Lois mused aloud.

"Huh?"

"I wonder if Claude acted the way he did with me because of how he was treated by his uncle."

"That's probably part of it, honey. When someone treats you as if you have no value, it's suddenly a whole lot easier to treat others that way."

"Mmm, there you go being wise again." Lois lifted herself up to meet her husband for a kiss. His hands slid upwards. "Hey, there aren't any stretch marks there!" she exclaimed.

"I know." He grinned at her. "I'm just making sure there aren't any there in the future!"

Lois giggled as she pressed herself closer to him. "Mmmm, good thinking, honey. Keep up the good work."

He wagged his eyebrows at her in mock innocence. "I intend to, Lois. I intend to."

She giggled again and looked down at her oil covered belly. "It's awful trying to wash this oil out of the sheets. At least it's your turn to do the laundry."

"Oh, in that case..." Clark twisted out of her embrace and retrieved the little vial of oil from its resting place. "...I intend to put this stuff to good use."

Later that same evening, Clark gently shook his wife's shoulder. "Lois? Lois, honey? Are you awake?"

"Huh? What is it?" Lois untangled herself from the sheets, rolled over, and blearily looked at her husband.

"The hospital called. Claude's taken a turn for the worse. It looks like this is it."

"Oh no!" Lois hoisted herself up to a sitting position. "How did they know to call us?"

"He had us listed as his next-of-kin." Clark looked at his wife in concern. "Did you want to go? To be with him?"

"Of course. He shouldn't be alone. And he doesn't have anyone else."

"Okay, you throw on some clothes, and then I'll fly us there." Clark effortlessly pulled Lois to her feet and gave her a quick kiss before she headed off to the bathroom.

Lois and Clark tentatively pushed open the door to Claude's hospital room. They were surprised to find that there were no doctors or nurses in attendance, but there was a priest busy laying out his supplies on a table. He had lit candles by Claude's bedside, their

light, the only light in the room. Claude's breathing was ragged and loud, filling the room with harsh sound. He lay limp and unmoving

The young priest turned to them. "I'm Father O'Connell. Are you Mr. Parizeau's family?"

Clark glanced quickly at Lois before answering in a firm voice, "Yes, we are."

"Good. I was just about to anoint him. Would you like to pray with me?"

Lois and Clark looked at each other before turning in unison to the priest. "Yes, we would, Father," Lois replied in a soft voice.

"Good. If you would like to come here by the bed, we can get started." The priest looked in concern at Lois's pregnancy-swollen belly. "I think you should sit, but your husband and I will stand, all right?"

Lois smiled wanly at him, as she took her seat beside the bedside. Clark moved into position behind her. "Father," he said. "Mr. Parizeau is French. Would you like me to translate your prayers for him?"

"That would be very helpful, my son. Thank you."

The priest dipped his fingers into oil and moved them, first to Claude's forehead and then to each of his two limp hands. He solemnly intoned a prayer over Claude. "By this holy and sacred anointing and by His beneficent mercy, may God with the grace of the Holy Spirit assist you so that you're redeemed and delivered from evil and sin. In His benevolence, may He raise you to new life."

The words fell into the pool of light surrounding them. The priest's voice was rich and rolling, his intonation beautiful and intimate, Clark's translation soft, murmuring counterpoint. Lois could only marvel at the sheer beauty of the ritual.

Lois thought about his words as she watched the priest continue to pray over Claude. 'Redeemed and delivered from evil and sin.' Claude had certainly done his best to achieve redemption. It was almost as though his illness were a kiln that had burnt away all the dross and imperfections in him, and what had emerged at the other end of the process had been purified. Lois was grateful that she had had the opportunity to see once again just what it was that had made her love Claude once upon a time.

Clark squeezed his wife's shoulders gently and also watched the priest as he did his work. 'May He raise you to new life.' What comforting words. Words to give hope. Claude had said many times how much he wanted to see his son Michel once again. Clark knew that if anything were to ever happen to Lois, it would only be the hope of seeing her again in the afterlife, and the desire to keep himself worthy of her company that would keep him going.

Father O'Connell finished by silently praying over Claude. After quickly packing up his supplies, he turned to them and said, "I have

to go check on some of the other patients here, but I'll be back in a little while. A nurse will be in in a few minutes to check on him, but she won't stay. Mr. Parizeau has left DNR orders." At Lois's questioning look, he explained, "'Do Not Resuscitate' orders. He doesn't want any medical intervention." The priest quietly left the room.

Lois and Clark moved closer to Claude's bedside. His eyes fluttered open but did not focus on them.

"Claude?" Lois tentatively touched his arm.

"Maman?"

"He thinks you're his mother," Clark whispered to her.

"It's Lois, Claude."

"Maman, tu m'as manque. Je ne savais pas ou tu es allee. Vas-tu rester avec moi?"

Clark quietly translated for Lois. She looked at him helplessly.

"I... He wants his mother. I guess I'll have to...I can pretend. Can you help me with the words?"

He nodded, and they began. Claude would murmur something, Clark would quietly translate and then provide a faltering Lois with the French words in return. It was a strangely intimate way of conversing.

"Oui, c'est maman, Claude. Bien sur, je vais rester avec toi. Tu es mon fils."

"Maman, j'ai soif."

"He's thirsty, Lois."

Lois trickled a little water into his mouth and watched as he swallowed convulsively. He coughed a little, but then lay still. He was silent for a long time, his breathing more shallow, and more halting.

"Mamam, je suis desole. J'ai peur. Reste avec mois, s'il te plait. Reste avec moi."

Lois took his hand in hers, and held it tight. Clark stood behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders, bracing her, and giving her strength. "Cheri, n'aie pas peur. Je suis ici. Je te protegerai. N'aie pas peur."

"Je t'aime, maman." _ _

_ "Je t'aime, Claude," Lois choked out through her tears. _

_ "Il fait nuit." He looked around the room, his eyes fluttering open and shut, not focusing on anything. "Il fait nuit," he repeated. "Maman, j'ai peur!" _ _

_ "Je suis ici, mon cher. Je suis ici." _ _

_ He lay quietly, his breaths coming in short gasps. The skin of his face was sallow, and stretched tight over his bones. They could see the rapid beat of his pulse in the corded tendons of his neck. As they watched, the remaining colour in his face slowly drained away, leaving him looking mottled and pale. His eyes opened, feverish and glazed, the only remaining trace of animation left to him. _

_ "Michel!" he exclaimed brightly, as he strained to raise himself off the bed. _

_ Clark was quick to reassure him. "Il t'attend, Claude." _

_ The sick man's eyes focused on Clark for a second, then his gaze shifted to a point over Clark's shoulder. "Non, mes amis. Lois et Clark, vous ne me comprenez pas. Il est ici, maintenant. Il m'attend. Mon fils, mon trésor, il est venu me chercher." He lifted one hand and extended it to the shadows, imploring the unseen shade of his son to approach. _

_ His breath caught and rattled in his throat, and his body convulsed, his emaciated torso lifting itself up off the bed. By the time his body flopped down limply, he was gone, the air escaping from his lungs in an eerie wheeze. _

_ "Oh," Lois exclaimed softly, her shaking hand moving up to cover her gaping mouth. _

_ Clark moved past her to straighten Claude's body on the bed, and to close his eyes. He sighed and turned back to Lois. "Are you okay?"

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_ "Yes, I'm fine. I'm just..." _

_ "Just what, honey?" _

_ "I'm not sure. I think I'm relieved for him, relieved that it's over, and that he didn't suffer too much, and I'm sad but... I don't know exactly what I'm feeling right now, Clark." _

_ Clark put his arm around Lois's waist in support. "Come on. Let's go tell the nurse. And then let's go home." _

_ He led her to the door. They both turned in unison, looked at Claude once again, and then silently left the room. _

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_ Lois lay awake in the darkness, her hands roaming idly over her pregnant belly. Their child was awake, making lazy, slow movements inside her. Clark lay spooned around her, his breathing slow and even as he slept. Lois couldn't sleep. _

_ Her feelings were so mixed. She felt a gentle sadness over the loss of her friend. No matter how much she loved Clark - and she loved Clark with her whole heart and soul - she had once loved that man. She had given herself to him. Oh, she hadn't loved him in the same way that she loved Clark - she could never love any man in the same way that she loved Clark - but, she had loved him. And he was dead.

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_ She had loved him; he had been the first man that she had loved enough to be with physically, and then she had hated him. She had hated him for many years with the same amount of passion that she had once felt in loving him. But that man, that hateful man, the man who had hurt her, Claude had killed that man himself when he had apologised to her, and attempted to make restitution to her. And in so doing, he had freed her from so many fears. She had sympathised with him when he talked to Corey earlier. She had sympathised when he had described how he had been afraid, how he had felt that he was too weak, and that he had to hide the truth about himself from others. That he wasn't worthy of being loved. She had felt that way once, still did from time to time, although, due to Clark's influence, she felt that way less and less. And now, she understood. She understood that in Claude's case, he had been fatally flawed by the abusive interest of an uncle. She understood that in her case, it hadn't been anything so blatant but had been much more insidious. Her parents had had their own problems. Her father loved her, had never wanted to hurt her, but he had anyway. He had made it so clear that he wanted a son. He had made it so impossible for her to live up to his expectations. And yet, if he hadn't been that way, if she hadn't tried so damn hard to meet his expectations, she wouldn't be an award-winning journalist, she wouldn't be the person she was today. And damn it! She liked the person she was today. _

_ She ran her hands lightly over her bulging belly once again, and sighed. So, what was the solution? How could she and Clark simultaneously challenge their child to grow, and at the same time, protect it from all harm? The obvious answer - they couldn't and yet they still had to try. But, one thing that Lois had learned from Claude, she couldn't let her own fears overwhelm her, she couldn't let Clark's fears overwhelm him, and she had to try her best to tame her child's fears as they arose. "Oh, my baby," she whispered to her unborn infant. "I'm going to be the best mom that I can be for you." That was all she could do. Do her best, try to fix her mistakes, love her child with her whole heart, and hope. Her mood lightened as she pondered these final thoughts. It wasn't going to be that bad. She had to do her best, and Lois Lane's best was pretty good most days. Clark Kent's best wasn't too shabby either. She smiled, patted her belly and spoke one last time before closing her eyes to drift off to sleep. "Baby, we're going to have such fun!" _

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_ Epilogue _

_ "Look, Mom! Look, Dad! There's Uncle Corey!!" The little girl sitting on her father's lap tugged at her parents' sleeves to get their attention. Then she started waving frantically at the stage.

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_ Lois leaned over and hugged her daughter. "He's waving back at you, Marty. Can you see him okay?" _

_ Martha Michelle Kent nodded happily, watched Uncle Corey for a little while longer, but eventually grew bored and went back to looking at her picture books. A graduation ceremony was pretty long for a six year old to have to sit through without any entertainment. Luckily the graduation ceremony just happened to coincide with her

little brother's nap time. CJ slept contentedly in the baby carrier at his mother's feet. _

_ Finally the ceremony was over. The Kents made their way slowly through the knots of happy graduates surrounded by family and friends until they spotted Corey Vandenburg and his family. His mother, Jen Henderson, was busy talking to some of his other relatives but Inspector Henderson rushed over to greet them right away, and pumped Clark's hand excitedly. "Thanks for coming!" He pulled them close to Corey who promptly kissed Lois, shook Clark's hand, and picked up Marty. "Thanks for coming, guys. Marty, I saw you waving at me. Did you see me waving at you?" _

_ She nodded happily, fingering the tassel on his cap and the material of his gown. _

_ "Congratulations, Corey!" Lois exclaimed. "So, Mr. University Graduate, what are you going to do now?" _

_ Corey grinned at his stepfather who beamed proudly back at them. "Bill, do you want to tell them or shall I?" _

_ Inspector Henderson laughed. "You tell them!" _

_ "Now I'm going to apply to police college. I want to be a cop." _

_ "That's great!" Clark exclaimed as he shook the police officer's hand once again. _

_ "Yeah," Corey replied. "I want to make a difference like my step-pop here. I want to make the world a safer place." _

_ His relatives closed in around him, in a chorus of congratulations, and the flash-bulbs started to pop as they took pictures. Lois, Clark, and their children celebrated Corey's new beginning with them. _

_ The end. _

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file.